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DECEMBER 1960 50¢

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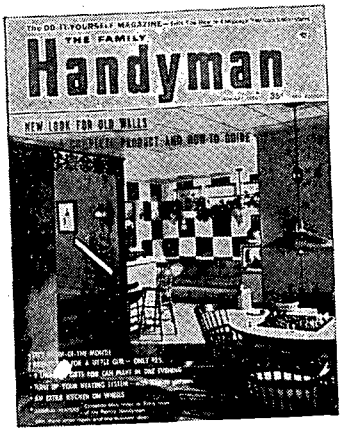

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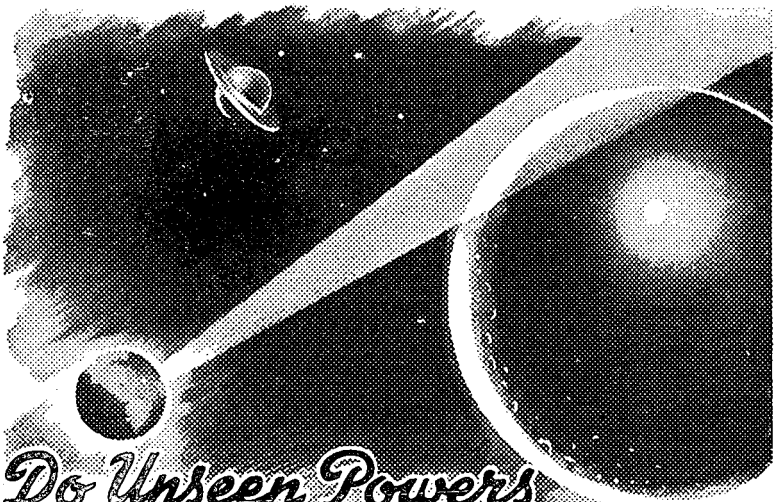

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CONTENTS

NOVELETS

THE WRONG WORLD ..... *by J. T. McIntosh* 8
SNUFFLES ..... *by R. A. Lafferty* 86
ROUND-AND-ROUND TRIP ..... *by H. B. Fyfe* 128
FIGHTING SPIRIT ..... *by Daniel F. Galouye* 172

SHORT STORIES

JAMIESON ..... *by William R. Doede* 43
METAMORPHOSIS ..... *by Charles V. De Vet* 72
SUBJECT TO CHANGE ..... *by Ron Goulart* 110
BLUEBLOOD ..... *by Jim Harmon* 148
BAD MEMORY ..... *by Patrick Fahy* 162

SCIENCE DEPARTMENT

FOR YOUR INFORMATION ..... *by Willy Ley* 56
The Moon Worm

FEATURES

EDITOR'S PAGE ..... *by H. L. Gold* 5
GALAXY'S FIVE STAR SHELF ..... *by Floyd C. Gale* 123
FORECAST 161

Cover by EMSH: *SEASON'S GREETINGS TO OUR READERS*

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REACTIONS

JUST about the safest bet you can make is that almost anything that has gone out of style will come back into style, that, at least on the political scene, friends will become enemies and enemies friends, and the like. Newton's Third Law of Motion, in other words. I have not now nor have I ever read Hegel and Marx, but I had, God wot, more than enough gab about "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" brayed at me as dialectics, when action, reaction and rest were meant.

You know what? I miss those verbal storm centers. I wouldn't if people were not playing things cool, no sweat, and other such terms for mental cyclone cellars. Right, left, middle and way the devil off in Cuckoo Land, the attackers, defenders and straddlers of the barricades in the living rooms cared. I would put "cared" in italics except that every reminiscer who has found his present lacking did so, clear back to Cato, and you know what *he* said. Besides, that's not the point here; I admire many of George Jessel's ex-wives — oh, ten or twenty, not all, I want it clearly understood — and I have no ambition to fit the comment one of them made: "Georgie has been reminiscing since he was six years old." My anecdotage, to quote somebody else, is, or feels, a good way off.

My point is beards and I appear to be trying to make it the hard way.

Beards were the cat's whiskers in the 19th century, and yet no President, from Washington to Grant, stumped the country without a razor. Lincoln? It was not until he was elected and sending out change-of-address notices that he sprouted. A little girl named Grace Bedell of Westfield, N. Y., had written him that she thought he would look better with whiskers. So he tried it, and by the hair of the Prophet, she was right!

In the next half century, all but two Presidents were beavers

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— Andrew Johnson (would he have come so close to impeachment if he'd been bearded?) and William McKinley (and did that figure in his assassination?) — and a skimpy three mustaches, Cleveland, Theodore Roosevelt and Taft. Since then, not even five o'clock shadow has darkened the faces of our Chief Executives.

Hair grew wild in those days. The assumption was that the male of the species, as with other critters, had to do his attracting with masculine appurtenances. (The females attracted right back, but this would be of note only if they either suddenly started or stopped.)

A man could just let his crop grow from the time he was a shaver, of course, with never a pruning, but such types were rare. In beardhood's full flowering, there were goatees, mutton chops, sideburns, and on and on and on, culminating, at least to my view, in the astonishing adornment worn by Horace Greeley, a fringe from lobe to lobe, not one whisker daring to raise its head above the jaw line. Now that was an age when a stylist could make other people's — and his own, more than likely — hair stand on end, or lie flat, or twist with wax, or any of the seemingly thousands of combinations with bristles below mouth and nose, and involving those items and eyes, ears and chin — a real landscaping job.

Now this is not an argument for or against beards. I am simply observing that the beard is returning; all countries have their Beat Generation, and the beard is the commonest denominator, so that Beardnik would perhaps be a closer-cropped term, instead of Beatnik and Teddy boys.

Like all first-generation growth, whether it be furze or forest or fuzz, today's beards are primeval. I know there are women who want to run their fingers through the things — wonderfully, there are women who want to run their fingers through anythingness or nothingness — but these are merely the shaggy forerunners of what may become a handsome and varied facial lawn, complete with hedges, windrows and terracings, and heaven knows what else, for styles in beards are sure to be as different and unpredictable as those in clothes and modes of transportation and anything else you might care to name.

Now we run into the seeming wall of attitude. Ignore it.

Attitude has never yet kept a style from happening or unhappening. To those men and women who would rather be caught dead than have or be married to a

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beard, for reasons seldom expressed in twenty-five words or less, I offer the assurance that when everybody else has or is married to one, the lack thereof would overrule all present objections.

One genius, trying to determine the very bravest act in the whole history of mankind, decided it was the first swallow of the first oyster.

My compliments to the man for a thorough sifting of history, and my apologies for cock-hatting his notion. My money says it was a kid. Kids love to be the first on their block, a desire and aim coldly exploited by the purveyors of the dried bread crumbs known as breakfast cereal. Papa may not want to be caught dead with a beard. Mama may share the feeling, though this is questionable when beards are becoming the fashion. But neither is proof against Junior's urging, cajoling, and, when nothing else works, accusations that this shows they don't love him.

Status—along with relationship and basis—is a workhorse word that ought to be allowed to rest up, but yes, status was very much involved in a man's ability to grow a beard and have something fresh and appealing done with it, and it can be again if a trend to the beard leads to all that was involved in every bearded era: male authority, the autocrat of the breakfast (and dinner) table the defender of honor, name and family. The sword and dueling pistol were the weapons of previous times; lawsuits and business ruin, public exposure to being outdone, all that sort of updated rivalry, make fine substitutes for antlers. But updated antlers can also be.

All this from non-conformist conformity in beard-growing? Except for the leaders, who always are a year or two ahead, non-conformity has been and is and can be expected to be conformity among the led. There lies the seed of the beard.

A number of reactions, heard round the world, strengthen the odds against beardlessness. Progressive education and permissive child-rearing are very heavily under fire, and female domination is also getting its lumps—more from women than men—and what, barring some unlovely exceptions, distinguishes the sexes more than the ability to grow a beard?

In other words, action has caused reaction. Like all reactions, it can be counted on to go too far. In what direction? Here's one educated guess — right from Barber's College.

—H. L. GOLD

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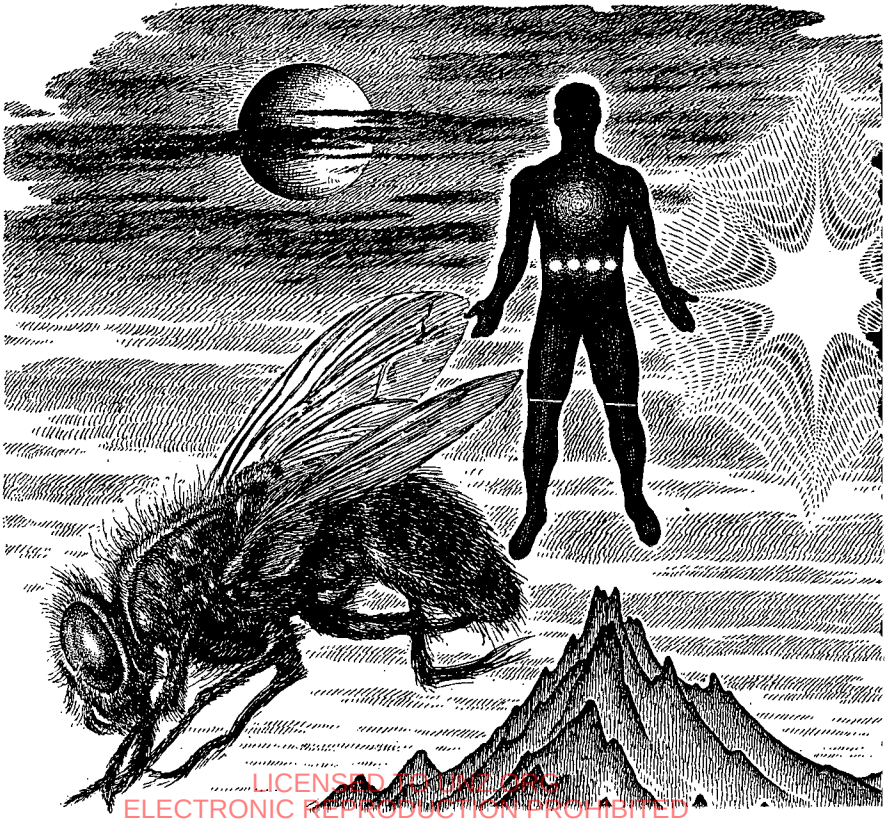
The Wrong World

By J. T. McINTOSH

Say "Oops, sorry" to a planet that has been conquered by mistake? No, find a diplomatic formula — meaning justify conquest — or else!

Illustrated by FINLAY



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CONSOLIDATION Officer Breeli couldn't have had a better first impression of the newly conquered world. The sun was shining brilliantly as he stepped from the ship, and the richness of this planet called Earth dazzled him.

Even the clouds, white and fleecy in an otherwise blue sky, were beautiful. Breeli had never seen beautiful clouds before. The landscape, rolling in gentle swells and curves to a shimmering gold and blue horizon, was a dream in green and brown.

Earth was quite a planet.

It was a pity that the Terrans were only at the Fifteenth Level. This wasn't a world to conquer, a world to ravage, a world to keep in subjection. This was a world to welcome cordially as a full member of the Pastan Federation.

However, only members of human races which had reached the Eighteenth or Nineteenth Levels were eligible for full membership of the Federation, and according to the last survey . . .

Breeli's reflections were disturbed as his gaze fell on two na-

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tive men painting a fence across the spaceport. Their white overalls didn't reveal much of their physical contours, but enough to indicate that the Terrans were a hundred per cent human, though the males were broader and heavier than Pastan men.

What interrupted Breeli's train of thought wasn't the mere sight of the two natives, however, but the way they were working. They seemed to be doing the job quickly, sensibly and efficiently, and without supervision. Their overalls, too, weren't of Pastan design, yet at that distance they looked well designed and serviceable.

Breeli could have sworn he was looking at two members of an Eighteenth Level race.

THAT was impossible, of course. General Prani would never have gone ahead with the total conquest plans if the Terrans had turned out to be Eighteenth Level. Anyway, the last survey had been made only a few thousand years before, and the Terrans had then been unquestionably Fifteenth Level, having just learned the uses of metals. They were probably Sixteenth Level now, but no higher.

"There's a car waiting for you, sir," said the lieutenant at Breeli's elbow. "I'm to drive you to General Prani's headquarters."

Breeli didn't allow his pleasure at the first sight of Earth to lure him into familiarity. Consolidation Officers held rank equivalent to field marshals, and since they were, in effect, civilians arriving after the shooting was over to take matters out of the hands of the military, they were never exactly popular with them. Scrupulous formality was best.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," he said.

"And this is your shield, sir," said the lieutenant, holding out a plastic belt with four small black discs on it.

Breeli raised his eyebrows. "I thought this world was supposed to be conquered."

"Depends what you mean by conquered, sir. There's no military resistance any more. But we all wear shields."

The standard equipment defense shield radiated around its wearer a force field which in ordinary circumstances remained completely quiescent. But if enough energy was generated within it quickly enough, the field became a miniature hyperspace drive. A bullet entering the field, for example, was rapidly shunted into hyperspace, its own impetus supplying the necessary power.

Men wearing shields could be strangled or stabbed, but they couldn't be shot, and an explosion wouldn't harm them, unless it was violent enough and big enough

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to swamp the field and topple shield, wearer and blast into hyperspace. Shields even afforded protection against too enthusiastic knife-thrusts. If you wanted to kill a man wearing a shield, you had to insert your knife into a convenient vital spot and press it home gently but firmly. And it was no use trying to hit him on the head with a blunt instrument.

But Breeli always felt uncomfortable when he wore one. "Put it away, Lieutenant," he said. "I'll take my chances."

"General Prani's orders, sir," the lieutenant persisted. "All Pastan personnel must wear shields at all times."

"I imagine my orders overrule General Prani's," Breeli remarked. "Where's the car, Lieutenant?"

The lieutenant wasn't enjoying himself, but he stood firm. "I can't drive you to headquarters if you don't have a shield, sir."

Lieutenants just didn't dictate to Consolidation Officers. But Breeli knew in his heart the lieutenant was right. Instead of making an issue of it — he could have had him arrested on the spot — Breeli meekly accepted the belt, swallowed hard and buckled it on.

BREELI stared at the car when they came to it. It was long, black and shiny, with a lot of glittering chromium. He wanted to ask the lieutenant who had built a car like that, and why, but restrained himself. No doubt somebody had made it to impress the natives.

The greatest shock came when the car turned smoothly onto a six-lane highway. Breeli was stunned. This roadway couldn't have been constructed by the occupying forces in the time at their disposal. Besides, why would they want a six-lane motorway? Obviously, therefore, it had been there before they came.

The Terrans had made it.

The implications were shattering. A Seventeenth Level race could have made such a road, conceivably even a Sixteenth Level race under intelligent supervision. But only an Eighteenth Level civilization would have any use for such a trafficway.

It was suddenly clear that the car he was in was of Terran origin, made for the highway on which it was running with such effortless ease, speed and comfort.

"Lieutenant," he said, controlling his voice with an effort, "these Terrans are Eighteenth Level."

"Yes, sir," said the lieutenant. "Perhaps Nineteenth."

"Then why—" Breeli began, and checked himself abruptly. Better to see Prani first.

An error of catastrophic proportions had been made. General Prani, sent to conquer Earth, had attacked and subdued an Eight-

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eenth — possibly Nineteenth — Level culture.

It was a ghastly blunder. When you moved in on a world peopled by apes, what the apes thought about it didn't matter very much. Even a Fifteenth Level race could be shoveled aside without much compunction — not exterminated, of course, for all races had a right to develop. A race at the Seventeenth Level, curiously enough, invariably welcomed conquest. They fought hard and savagely, but they respected conquest and learned rapidly from their conquerors. Conquest was good for them.

An Eighteenth Level race, however, had a great respect for the value of human life and liberty. It had a delicately balanced economy which could easily be ruined. It had a highly developed social structure. Most of all, it had pride and a strong sense of its own importance.

Moral issues aside, conquering an Eighteenth Level civilization didn't pay. It wasn't good for the conquerors or conquered.

But moral issues couldn't be kept aside. A capital crime had been committed.

Heads would roll for this.

THE car slowed slightly to turn off the motorway. There had been no other vehicles on it, and the only living creatures to be seen had been Pastan guards on foot, patrolling the grass verges. Presumably General Prani had commandeered this whole area, permitting no Terrans to enter.

The exit was ingenious. The car sped off to the right to turn to the left, crossing the motorway by a bridge. Silently, Breeli cursed General Prani. Hadn't it been obvious at a glance that these Terrans must be wooed, not ravished?

The very much inferior road on which they were now traveling had footpaths on each side, and Breeli's eyes almost popped from his head when he had his first glimpse of Terran women — three of them, on the sidewalk.

"Stop the car!" he shouted. "Those women . . ."

The lieutenant slowed the car but didn't stop. "Sorry, sir," he said. His face was red with embarrassment at having to thwart a Consolidation Officer for the second time in ten minutes. "Don't you think you'd better see General Prani first, sir? I mean, you don't know the native language, and anyway . . . I'm very sorry, sir."

"You have no specific orders to stop when I tell you?" Breeli asked.

"No, sir. But . . . no, sir."

"It's merely your own idea, then, not to do what I tell you, and make me do what I don't want to do?"

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"I . . . yes, sir."

"What's your name?"

"Lieutenant Wilt, sir," the driver said miserably, knowing he was in for trouble.

Breeli, his first unthinking impulse to stop and take a closer look at the three women thwarted, could see excellent reasons why he should not do so. As Wilt had said, he couldn't speak the language. Also, he didn't yet know the terms of Earth's surrender. Perhaps there were religious, racial and social taboos of which he knew nothing.

Once more Lieutenant Wilt was undoubtedly right.

Wilt was a man to watch, possibly a man to have promoted. However, there was no need to reassure him just at this moment.

The car turned into a drive flanked by trees and slowed to a crawl. So Prani's headquarters still had to be protected by a diverter, Breeli mused. Natural enough, if the Terrans really were Nineteenth Level.

The diverter was simply a big defense shield with a wider field of application. Ships protected by it could divert even atomic explosions into hyperspace. When it was used for the defense of a town or building, it could be set so low that only a shell or bomb-blast would cause a reaction violent enough to trigger the shield, or so high that even a stray dog blundering into it would be toppled into hyperspace.

The fact that the lieutenant dropped the car's speed to about ten miles an hour as he approached the yellow building among the trees indicated that General Prani had his diverters at very cautious settings.

BREELI did not, of course, recognize the yellow building as a roadhouse, but he was struck by its attractive, functional lines. The sick feeling which had come over him returned as he saw the sparkling swimming pool to one side of the building. That was conclusive. Only a civilized race could have the know-how and organizing ability to collect and pipe water where they wanted it in such quantities that a huge open-air pool with a circulating system was a practical proposition. A Seventeenth Level race might collect and pipe the water, but it couldn't circulate, purify and aerate it.

Prani would be executed. Breeli wouldn't be held responsible for something he had arrived too late to prevent, but things wouldn't be exactly comfortable for him either.

Breeli was a little surprised to be ushered in by a native woman who spoke fluent Pastan with a tolerable accent.

"What's your name?" he asked.

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"Dorothy Green, sir. I am chief Terran liaison officer."

"Appointed by the Terrans or by General Prani?"

"By mutual agreement, sir."

She had a pleasant voice which didn't go with her appearance. Unlike the three women Breeli had seen on the way, she was frankly unattractive. She was painfully thin, colorless, and though her drab brown-gray uniform was neat and spotless, it did nothing for her.

As long as Terran females had to be employed at HQ, it was very sensible that they should be unattractive enough to prove no distraction. If those three girls had jobs at HQ, Breeli reflected, very little paper work would be done.

"How do I address you?" he asked, wondering if this would provoke a bitter retort.

"As you wish," she said. "Dorothy or Green or both."

"Very well," he said, not committing himself. He thought he sensed sorrow in this girl, which would account for some of her drabness. He wondered if it was sorrow on account of the Pastans or anything they had done. "Don't you ever smile?"

"Not very often," she said, not smiling. "You'll find General Prani in there, sir."

PRANI was middle-aged and fat and complacent and had the thick, moist lips of a sensualist. Everything became clear to Breeli at first sight of him.

General Prani wasn't very bright. Somehow, through sheer good luck, he had been saved from ignominy time and again by the ability and intelligence of his subordinates. Somehow he had become a general and had been entrusted with an important mission.

And, of course, he had bungled it.

"Glad to see you, sir," said Prani. "I think we'll manage to make you comfortable here. The native women are quite . . . shall we say cooperative? Yes, this is a splendid world. Modesty apart, I think I've done a pretty good job, sir."

The buffoon was actually pleased with himself.

"General," said Breeli quietly, "the Terrans are at the Eighteenth Level, I understand."

"I haven't given it much thought, sir. Nineteenth, I should say. No detailed assessment has been made. Modesty apart, not every general could conquer a Nineteenth Level world."

"General, aren't you aware that it's a serious crime under Federation law to interfere with races above the Seventeenth Level?"

"But I was sent to conquer this world. Naturally I obeyed my orders."

"You were sent to subjugate a Fifteenth or Sixteenth Level

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world. You found a race at the Nineteenth Level. Didn't it even occur to you that your orders no longer applied?"

"Sir," Prani said stiffly, "I have risen to my present position in the Pastan Federation Army by doing exactly as I was told. It is not for me to question the orders of men far abler . . . hum . . . than myself. In this case my orders were to conquer Earth. It was nothing to me if the Terrans were Fifteenth Level, or Nineteenth, or any other level. I merely did my duty as a soldier in the service of the Pastan Federation."

"Quite," said Breeli drily.

There were two possible ways out, neither particularly honest—but in interstellar politics, expediency had to play a large part. If the Terran resistance had been slight, it might be possible to pretend there had been no conflict at all, merely police action. And if sufficient time could be gained somehow, it might be possible to pretend that the Terrans had been at the Seventeenth Level when Prani conquered the world, and had developed rapidly afterwards, owing to contact with the Pastans.

"Have you seen the native women, sir?" Prani asked, magnanimously forgiving Breeli for failing to appreciate him.

"Some of them."

"Do you want one, sir?"

Breeli restrained himself with an effort. Anyone capable of the criminal idiocy of attacking a Nineteenth Level world was naturally incapable of seeing that it was criminal idiocy.

"There will be no difficulty about that?" he asked.

"None, sir," said Prani expansively. "At first these Terrans bitterly resented what they called the rape of their women, but there was a sudden reversal of their attitude. I have not, of course, taken it upon myself to permit marriage between Pastans and native women, but if you will be guided by me, sir, you will give permission soon. Many Terran women are exceedingly attractive—"

"Like Dorothy Green?"

"You're joking, sir. Certainly not like Dorothy Green. Intelligent girl, useful, but ugly. Modesty apart, I am very attractive to women, sir, and . . . but meantime, shall I have half a dozen sent in for you to choose from?"

AGAIN a sharp reprimand teetered on Breeli's lips. But he wanted to know more before committing himself. "As you wish."

General Prani spoke into the intercom. When he had finished, Breeli said: "I take it Terran resistance was slight? That's an extremely good thing. We may yet manage to get out of this without—"

"Slight?" Prani cried, affronted.

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"Sir, this has been the greatest campaign in the entire history of the Pastan Federation, and, modesty apart, the greatest victory!"

Breeli groaned.

Prani settled himself comfortably behind his desk and started his prepared speech complacently. "I'll begin with a paradox, sir. These people are advancing technologically at an enormous rate. In the last fifteen of their years—about ten of ours — they have advanced more rapidly than we ever did in any fifty years of our history. Yet, if we had arrived fifteen years ago, we'd never have conquered them at all."

"They have been concentrating too much on nuclear power?"

Prani's jaw dropped. In his astonishment, he was rude. "Who told you?"

"No one. But I am not unintelligent, General — and this kind of thing has happened before."

The general was not convinced. "I see you deserve your high position, sir. You are precisely right. Fifteen years ago — I use the local measure of time, of course — the Terrans' defenses were largely non-nuclear. In the meantime they have gone over almost entirely to nuclear power."

"So when you arrived, channeling all nuclear explosions into hyperspace, they had nothing to fight with?"

Prani wasn't pleased at the brusque interruption. "Frankly, sir, it was an unpleasant shock to be attacked with atomic weapons when we believed this was a Fifteenth Level world. But I pride myself on flexible command. Modesty apart, few generals could have changed their plans so rapidly. I—"

"At the moment, I don't want a campaign report, General. You fought the Terrans and beat them."

The general waved a pudgy hand deprecatingly. "*I* was in command, sir. Despite the fact that I had been completely misinformed about the people of this world, I pressed home the attack without fear of consequences, and won a great victory for the Pastan Federation."

"General," said Breeli drily, "consequences have caught up with you. But before I say any more, what were your losses in men and materials?"

"The Terrans fought with considerable military skill. Had I not myself been resolute—"

"Yes, General. The losses?"

"It was, of course, an expensive campaign, sir."

"Precisely. Let me see the figures."

"I have them here, sir."

He handed Breeli a single sheet of paper.

There was a long silence. Then:

"You call this victory?" Breeli whispered.

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"I told you it was the greatest battle in the entire history of the Pastan Federation, sir."

"So you did. The Terrans, I imagine, suffered similar losses?"

"Oh, considerably more, sir."

THAT was that, then. The catastrophe was even greater than Breeli had feared. There was nothing for it but to place Prani under arrest and have him sent back to Pasta for trial.

Breeli had one last try. Almost pleadingly he said: "When you found the Terrans far more advanced than you had been led to expect, didn't you consider trying to form a peaceful alliance with them, instead of going ahead with plans for conquest?"

"No, sir," said Prani bluntly. "I was ordered to conquer this world. I had no authority to do anything else."

Breeli sighed. Lieutenant Wilt had no authority to stop the Consolidation Officer doing something rash — yet Wilt had done so. Twice.

"General, if you were ordered to make a surprise attack on Tuesday evening and you discovered on Tuesday afternoon that the enemy had not only heard about the attack but were waiting for it — would you still attack?"

"Certainly," said Prani.

Breeli sighed again.

"I gather," said Prani, "that you consider I have acted wrongly in this matter?"

"General Prani, your family will find it necessary to change their name. Every official who had anything to do with sending you on this mission will be examined for latent insanity — and rightly so, for most of the blame is theirs. You, General, will consider yourself—"

A welcome relief for the shocked, incredulous Prani was afforded by the sudden arrival of the six Terran girls he had requested. They came in boldly and arranged themselves against one wall of the office, smiling and laughing. They were neither insolent nor timid.

And Breeli would have rated each one of them, individually, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

That they looked exotic was hardly surprising. They were slightly paler, slightly smaller than Pastan women. Their eyes were a little larger, set further apart. Their legs were longer, their arms a little shorter. The contrasts of their bodies were more extreme—larger busts and hips, smaller waists.

Any one of them would have been a sensation in a Pastan street, and it would have occurred to no one to think of her as alien.

In dress they varied considerably. Two wore long skirts, one a

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very short skirt. One wore loose slacks, one tight pants, one very brief shorts. All wore belts that emphasized their small waists, and all except one had tight blouses or dress tops that plainly showed why they had tight blouses. There were two blondes, three brunettes, one redhead.

"Do any of them speak Pastan?" Breeli asked.

"We all do," said the redhead. She was the one in the shorts. All the girls looked as if they had good figures, but in her case there was no possible doubt about it. Above her tiny red shorts she wore a white strapless suntop, and as he looked at her Breeli felt as he hadn't felt since he left his concupiscent teens behind him.

"That's Margo Day," said Prani, who had already recovered his usual complacency. "I'd have taken her myself, only I already have a woman, and those Terran girls are very jealous."

"Any of us would consider it an honor to meet your requirements, Consolidation Officer Breeli," said the redhead, Margo Day.

Breeli started. "You know me?"

"And your high position," she said respectfully. "You're what we would call a governor. Please make your choice, sire. Satisfaction is guaranteed, sire."

"What is 'sire'?"

"It means father. A very respectful form of address, sire."

BREELI was no fool and he knew irony when he heard it. Margo Day was laughing up her non-existent sleeve at him. Only a fool complains about something he can't prove, however.

Until this moment he had merely been playing along with the situation, without any real intention of taking a Terran mistress. But why not take one? If Terran women were as compliant as this, nothing he did was going to make the position any worse than it was already. Indeed, it seemed as if the Terrans had fully accepted the situation, and in that case the effects of General Prani's colossal blunder might not be so bad.

Every instinct in Breeli but one screamed at him to choose Margo Day. She headed the group in looks, personality and brains.

The dissenting instinct, however, was a very important one. If the enemy — and these women were the enemy, after what Prani had done — wanted him to do something, he preferred to do something else.

"What's your name?" he asked the blonde beside Margo.

"Helen Krauss," the girl in the tight pants said, and Breeli sensed with satisfaction that she and Margo Day and all the others were in some way disconcerted. He hadn't been expected to pick Helen Krauss.

"Wait for me outside," he told

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Helen Krauss, and turned back to Prani.

The six girls filed out.

"Tell me," said Breeli sharply, when the door had closed behind them, "are these people really conquered? Is their resistance over?"

"I would not have given the signal for your arrival otherwise," Prani said loftily.

"You mean there's no sabotage? No assassination? Can I trust that woman Helen Krauss with my life?"

"Oh, I wouldn't suggest that, sir," said Prani. "You'll have a guard, naturally. You have your shield. She'll be searched frequently. She mustn't be given the slightest chance to—"

"Then there is sabotage? Assassination?"

"Occasionally, when officers and men are careless, sir. But—"

"Why don't you stop it by reprisals?"

"There's a clause in the surrender terms, sir. They wouldn't sign without it. No reprisals for acts by individuals. A conspiracy has to be proved. After all, sir, we're the conquerors. For years individual rebels will commit what subversive acts they can. Modesty apart, sir, I consider it a triumph to arrange such an early armistice. Without that clause they'd have gone on fighting until—"

"I see."

So it was neither a peaceful alliance with the Terrans nor a proper conquest. The sooner Breeli found out exactly what it was, the better.

"I'm going on a tour of inspection of the district," Breeli said, postponing the question of what to do about General Prani. "Can I have Lieutenant Wilt as guide?"

"Who's Lieutenant Wilt, sir?"

"He drove me from the spaceport."

"Then he must have gone back there, sir. I'll detail Captain Barvel."

"I'd rather have Lieutenant Wilt. Oh, well, never mind."

WILT, as Prani thought, had been sent back to the spaceport after delivering his important passenger.

The girl Helen Krauss was waiting outside. Breeli particularly wanted to have her along, being sure that he could find out a great deal from her — not necessarily believing what she said. What she talked freely and truthfully about would be what the Terrans didn't mind his knowing. When she seemed to be lying, or refused to answer, or pretended not to know, he would have a few lines to investigate.

He had no idea what he was going to do. He couldn't very well tell the Terrans the attack on

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them had been a mistake. The conquest of Earth was an accomplished fact, and Breeli could see no way of making a tactical withdrawal and pretending that umpteen thousand dead Pastans and Terrans were still alive. Yet the subjection of a Nineteenth Level world couldn't go on.

It wasn't a moral question any more. It was a political one. The moral crime had already been committed; now the problem was to minimize its effects. Since Earth was still struggling under the yoke, perhaps the Pastan Army could allow itself to be driven from the planet, allegedly by a Seventeenth Level race on the threshold of the Eighteenth Level. Then, a few centuries later, Earth, now an acknowledged Nineteenth Level civilization, could be offered peaceful affiliation to the Federation.

That would get around most of the awkward points. But too many Pastan Army officers and men knew that the Terrans were already far beyond the Seventeenth Level, and when they got home the explosive truth would be out.

No, that wouldn't work. But what would?

Breeli became aware that Dorothy Green was carefully instructing Captain Barvel on the itinerary to be followed. Although Breeli said nothing, he thought a lot. This Terran female seemed to have a lot of responsibility, and she knew exactly where he was going to be all afternoon at any moment. Why was she trusted to such an extent?

"Please stick to this route, Captan Barvel," she was saying earnestly, "or I can't be responsible for what might happen."

Breeli took another good look at Dorothy Green. She was a small, slim, restless, energetic creature, with tiny, sharp features and short dark hair. Her body was stringy and bony, and he couldn't imagine anyone of any race finding her desirable.

It was a pleasure after looking at Dorothy Green to watch Helen climbing into the car assigned to him. He climbed in after her. He found it interesting that she recoiled involuntarily at first as his hip touched hers, and then leaned against him provocatively.

"What do you think of Dorothy Green?" he asked abruptly.

THE unexpected question baffled her, and it was some seconds before she could think of anything to say. "Why, what should I think of her?"

"That's what I'm asking you," said Breeli. "Do you despise her as a traitor?"

"Her husband is a hostage. She's got to work for you."

"I didn't know there were any hostages."

"General Prani wouldn't accept

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Terran liaison officers unless he had hostages."

That was sensible of Prani, in the circumstances. Although it had been criminal idiocy to attack and defeat the Terrans, it wouldn't improve matters to be so weak and ingratiating that the occupation was ineffective.

Perhaps the fact that Dorothy Green's husband was a hostage explained her somber manner.

"So you have a ceremony of marriage?" asked Breeli.

"Of course," Helen said, surprised.

"Are you married?"

"Me? No."

"Don't you want to be married?"

"Every girl does."

"Then why aren't you?"

"Nobody ever asked me."

"And somebody asked Dorothy Green?"

"Yes." She clearly had no idea what he was getting at.

Apparently Terran men married girls with brains rather than beauty. It was logical, but Breeli knew of no other race which was logical in that particular way.

If it was true that Terran men married women for their intelligence rather than their looks, that might explain why six girls like those he had seen in Prani's office had nothing better to do with themselves than become the mistresses of Pastan officers.

Yet Margo Day had seemed intelligent . . .

The car was returning to the six-lane highway. Captain Barvel was in the back with a couple of guards. Breeli would have preferred to be alone with Helen, but recognized the need for guards. He was the most important man in many light-years. No doubt the Terrans, who seemed to know all about him, would kill him if they could. He remembered Dorothy's earnest warning to Barvel: "Please stick to this route, or I can't be responsible for what might happen."

The car reached the feed-in to the motorway. Again it was necessary to cross the vast trafficway by a bridge, since they were going in the opposite direction from the spaceport. The six lanes looked naked without cars flashing along them.

"Where's all the traffic now?" Breeli asked.

Barvel started to answer, but Breeli cut him off. He was interested in Helen's answers, not Barvel's.

"None of us are allowed in this area except liaison personnel," she said.

"How about you and Margo and the other girls?"

"We're liaison personnel."

So the Terrans *officially* provided mistresses for high-ranking Pastan officers.

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"How do you feel about us, Helen?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes. Do you hate us?"

SHE struggled to find an answer. Apparently she didn't want to say yes, but felt the impossibility of saying no.

"Why are you here with me?" Breeli asked pointedly.

"Because you told me to—"

"You know what I mean."

"It's an honor . . ." Helen said without conviction.

"Nonsense. Margo Day was being sarcastic when she said that. What are you doing it for? Money? Prestige? A chance to slip a knife between my ribs?"

She said nothing, which was sensible of her.

Helen Krauss wasn't bright for a Terran. There was no character, no personality, no humor in her answers. She was like a beautiful robot which made the right responses when the right buttons were pushed.

A beautiful robot. Breeli considered it seriously for a moment. Possibly the Terrans were sufficiently advanced to make lifelike robots . . . no, that was absurd. However, to make absolutely sure, he resolved to have Helen Krauss X-rayed when they got back.

Still considering the possibility, he was a little too late in noticing something which would normally have put him on his guard at once. The driver had asked Barvel a question, Barvel had replied, and Helen had said:

"Say, are we going to Heronville? Why didn't you tell me? Turn off right here and we'll save fourteen miles."

Suppose she were a robot. Prani had a Terran mistress too. Suppose some night, when practically every high-ranking Pastan officer had a beautiful Terran robot with him, a button was pushed and all the beautiful robots blew up . . .

The car had turned off the highway and was traveling more slowly along a narrow feed road. "Wait a minute," said Breeli. "Didn't Dorothy Green say—"

The mine tripped by the car's front wheels exploded under the rear left wheel. The car and its contents flew in many directions in many pieces. Their shields entirely enveloped in the explosion, Barvel, the driver and the two guards were victims of blowback and disappeared into hyperspace. And Helen Krauss had no shield.

Breeli, farthest from the explosion, was saved by his shield. But he was blown twenty feet in the air, and as he approached the ground extremely rapidly, the shield, faced with the task of shunting a world eight thousand miles in diameter into hyperspace, prudently gave up.

Breeli landed in a bush and

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found to his dazed astonishment that he was able to scramble out of it. He staggered a short distance and tripped over something. Looking down, he felt sick.

Helen Krauss had been no robot.

BREELI regained consciousness in bed. For a few seconds he lay bringing himself up to date, reliving the explosion. Then he opened his eyes.

Lieutenant Wilt was with him, young, solid, reassuring. Breeli was puzzled. Why Wilt?

Breeli could hardly guess that Prani, distracted and terrified after the incident, jolted out of his usual state of self-satisfaction, hadn't dared to face Breeli. After dredging his mind for someone to whom he could delegate the task, he had remembered that Breeli had asked for Wilt as his driver.

"What shape am I in?" Breeli asked.

"You're fine, sir," Wilt said. "Not even concussion. Bruises, of course. You'll be able to walk out of here tomorrow."

"The others?"

"All dead or going into hyperspace, sir."

Wilt was bewildered. He had expected a strong reprimand once Breeli had seen General Prani, and when he'd been called back from the spaceport, he had expected to get it. Instead he found that Consolidation Officer Breeli had had a miraculous escape from death and that he, Wilt, was expected to sit and wait for him to regain consciousness. Why he had been chosen for this, Wilt couldn't begin to guess. He assumed some mistake had been made in the transmission of orders.

Breeli wasn't thinking about Wilt at the moment, nor of his escape, nor of the people who had been with him. He was wondering how the explosion had been arranged.

Dorothy Green had sent him on the route he had taken, but the alteration in the route had been Helen's. How had that dumb Terran blonde fixed things so that four Pastan officers and very nearly the Consolidation Officer as well had been killed?

"What are you doing here?" he asked abruptly.

"I don't know, sir," said Wilt. "I was told to sit with you. I'm Lieutenant Wilt, sir, the driver who—"

"I know. You nearly died in that car, Wilt. I asked for you as driver."

"You did, sir?" Wilt was astonished.

"Perhaps you wouldn't have died. Perhaps you'd have had the sense not to follow that girl's directions."

"It was her then, sir?"

"I don't know. I'm going to find

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out. Bring Dorothy Green here."

"Yes, sir." He hesitated. "Are you . . . can you handle this affair, sir?"

"If I can't," said Breeli, closing his eyes, "I'll have the benefit of your wisdom and experience, Lieutenant."

Wilt looked at him doubtfully. "Yes, sir."

DOROTHY Green was white-faced but resolute. "I gave your driver a route entirely on roads which are constantly guarded," she said. "He should have known not to turn off them at any point, for any reason."

"But you're not heartbroken that four Pastan officers died."

"Governor Breeli, I—"

"If I cut a hole in you," Breeli said thoughtfully, "would you bleed?"

"Naturally."

"We'll try it and see."

She went even whiter. But her voice was steady. "Governor, your people so far have at least been just. You know I couldn't have been directly concerned in the attempt on your life."

"Not directly — but indirectly?"

"In no way. Most of the roads in this country are mined. I know that. Your men know that. Ask anyone. Ask the lieutenant here. Anyone who turned off the highway was a fool. *I* couldn't have made him do it even if I wanted to. If I had given your driver a route involving side roads, I'd have been questioned at once."

"Give me your hand."

She did so, wonderingly. He grasped her thin wrist. Her heart was beating rapidly but strongly. It was inconceivable that she was anything but a human female. He would have to abandon the robot idea.

"You can go," he said. Then, when she was relieved and off her guard, he asked: "Do you still love your husband, Dorothy?"

She recoiled from him. "Until you said that," she whispered, "I thought you were quite human, Governor."

Breeli was at a loss. "I'm not threatening to have him killed. I merely asked if you love him."

"The answer is yes, I do." And for the first time he saw fierce warmth in her brown eyes as she stared back defiantly at him. Her fierceness couldn't make her pretty — but it could, and did, make her suddenly intensely alive.

"Where is he?" Breeli asked.

"At an internment camp a hundred miles from here. I see him every Sunday."

"You could visit him oftener than that if you like. Shall I arrange it?"

"It wouldn't be any good," she said, the fierceness fading.

She puzzled him. No doubt the separation from the man she loved

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explained her unhappiness. But in his experience intelligent, efficient, energetic people usually managed to get what they wanted, even if they didn't have beauty to help them. Surely, if all she wanted was to be with her husband, she could get out of serving as a liaison officer and have him restored to her.

"When were you married?" he asked.

"Six years ago, when I was twenty."

"Were you pretty then?"

"No more than I am now."

"It doesn't bother you, not being pretty?"

"I'm quite happy the way I am."

He made a gesture, and she went.

"Is it true that most of the roads are mined?" Breeli asked Wilt.

"Yes, sir. Your driver was very careless."

"Well, he paid for it."

Wilt looked at him curiously. This Consolidation Officer revealed a humanity rare in the lieutenant's experience of high-ranking officers.

MARGO Day sauntered in. She had changed her already scanty costume for an even scantier one. Now she wore white striped shorts and a completely—and deliberately—inadequate black halter. Lying in bed, Breeli suddenly felt uncomfortably warm.

"Do you always dress like that?" he asked.

"No, sire," she said, "but I thought that if I gave you a better look at the merchandise, I might make a sale."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Maybe I should have played hard to get. Shall I go and put on a long black cloak instead?"

"You mean you want to take Helen's place? You think I'd be fool enough to let another Terran girl try to kill me?"

"Well, that's the snag," Margo said frankly. "That's why I have to use good salesmanship."

She was actually admitting that she was prepared to be his mistress just for a chance to kill him.

"Were you in on the plan?"

"No, that must have been Helen's and nobody else's."

"How do you think she managed it?"

"Oh, she was just lucky there was a mine there, and unlucky that she was killed and you weren't. Still, it was a good bargain — her life for four Pastans."

"Your attitude seems different from what it was earlier."

"How? I said it would be an honor to be your mistress. Which, in this crazy situation, it is. It would be an even greater honor to kill you, sire."

"Dorothy Green's been trying hard to convince me she wouldn't kill me."

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"She's different. Her husband is a hostage. Anyway, she's a renegade. If you don't stay in control, she'll get half a dozen bullets in the guts anyway. I'm not a renegade. I've got nothing to fear from my own people."

"Despite collaboration?"

"What collaboration? Everybody knows I'll stick a knife in your back if I get the chance."

Her honesty was startling. Yet everything she said made sense. Conquerors on a human planet umpteen light-years from their own had to have women, even women who would kill them if they could.

"Suppose you gave me your word not to make any attempt on my life?"

"Suppose anything you like. You'd be stupid to take my word, sire."

"Would you give it?"

She laughed. "This is a very theoretical conversation, isn't it? Sure, I'll promise not to try to kill you. I've already told you that I'll do it if I get the chance. That makes me a liar anyway."

"I think I'll take you up on your offer, all the same."

"That's great, sire. Want me to get into bed with you now?"

Wilt choked.

"No. I'll send for you when I want you."

"Mean you want me to go?"

"Yes."

WHEN the door had closed behind her, Breeli said thoughtfully: "Have you got an Earth girl, Wilt?

"Yes, sir."

"Doesn't it bother you to know she'd stick a knife in you if she could?"

"She wouldn't, sir. Not Nancy."

"Don't be too sure, Lieutenant. These people seem to have a remarkable passion for freedom."

"Yes, sir. 'Give me liberty or give me death.' A Terran saying, sir."

"Said by a man or a woman?"

Wilt looked surprised. "A man, sir. Terran society isn't a matriarchy."

"No? That makes the present situation very hard to understand."

"Sir?"

"Never mind. It looks as if the attempt on my life and the deaths of my guards will have to be passed off as a regrettable accident. Wilt, was the war really savage?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yet you don't think your little friend would kill you?"

"I'm sure of it. She — she loves me, sir."

"Why?"

"Sir?"

"Why? Is she pretty?"

"Yes, sir. Very."

"How does that make sense, Wilt? Earth's far beyond the stage

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of respecting conquerors. Why do their most beautiful women throw themselves at our heads? Outside of fiction, girls like Margo Day don't have to be heroines. They can leave that to plain girls. Why, Wilt, why?"

"I don't quite understand, sir."

"Well, think about it, Lieutenant. Meanwhile, bring me some publications to read. Terran publications, with pictures."

"Yes, sir. Some came in, today."

"I want old ones too. Publications printed before the occupation."

"There aren't any, sir."

"Then find some."

"I mean there are none left, sir. They've all been destroyed."

"Get some from a waste disposal organization."

"You still don't understand, sir. A lot of us wanted to see old Terran publications, to get some kind of picture of what Earth was like before we came. But we've never been able to find any. The Terrans have destroyed them all."

"Deliberately, so that we can't see them?"

"It would appear so, sir."

"That's strange," Breeli mused. "What would there be in publications that they wouldn't want us to see?"

"We don't know, sir. We've often wondered."

"Yet current publications are freely available?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, Lieutenant, bring me some."

BREELI was left with his thoughts. There were many things about which he was puzzled. But very soon he would have to take some sort of action.

The present situation couldn't be allowed to continue, that was certain. The Pastan Federation would never ratify any solution to the Earth problem based on a military occupation of a Nineteenth Level world. Already Breeli had once been on the point of ordering Prani to consider himself under arrest.

Yet how could he go to the Terran leaders, whoever and wherever they were, and say: "I'm sorry General Prani conquered Earth. It was a stupid mistake. Now can we please be friends?"

He might say: "The Pastan Federation is just. We will withdraw under certain conditions," and give them all they asked. But the Terrans were intelligent enough to realize that that came to the same thing.

Damn General Prani!

Breeli glanced moodily through the publications that Wilt had brought. Unable to understand a single word of the text, all he could do was look at the pictures.

There were newspapers, books, technical journals, women's maga-

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zines, weeklies and monthlies devoted to current events, fashion, sport, finance, hobbies of various kinds, music, films, agriculture, television, radio, education . . .

"Wilt!" he shouted.

The lieutenant, who had been on guard outside the door, came in at once.

"Get hold of some Terran films made before the occupation force arrived. Any kind of films."

Wilt shook his head. "Sorry, sir. There aren't any of those either."

"Destroyed like the old publications?"

"Yes, sir. They didn't destroy their art treasures, though, if that's any help, sir."

"Well, is it?"

"Not that I could see, sir. Lots of nudes. Very beautiful females. The males are pretty bulky, however."

"True to life, at least. Terran men *are* mostly overbuilt."

Breeli waved him away and stared at the publications that littered his bed. In what way were these different from the ones which had appeared before the occupation? In their occasional reference to the Pastans, certainly. But that was no reason to hide or destroy pre-conquest publications.

One of the magazines had a color picture of Margo Day on the cover, wearing panties and folded arms. In one of the others was a picture of Helen Krauss, not wearing anything at all. He wished he could read what was said about them.

Still staring at the beautiful picture of Margo, he found sleep closing in on him. Not unnaturally, he had lurid dreams in which Margo was much more to him than a sister.

THE next day he was able to walk out of the hospital, as Wilt had promised, stiff and sore but otherwise in good working order. Wilt wanted to take his arm; Breeli refused help.

"I am *not* old enough to be your father, Lieutenant," he said, annoyed.

"No, sir. I didn't think you were."

"Send Margo Day to me."

"Is that wise, sir?"

Breeli stifled the impulse to snap at him. Having chosen Wilt because Wilt would answer back, he wouldn't be acting very logically to snap at Wilt for doing so.

"Are you sure Nancy wouldn't kill you?" Breeli asked instead.

"Quite sure, sir. But that's different. I've known her for weeks. We'll be married whenever marriages between Terrans and Pastans are permitted. This girl Margo Day—"

"Nancy's prepared to go and live in Pasta?"

"Yes, sir. She loves me. But Margo Day—"

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"It is inconceivable that any woman could ever love me, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir. But not in five minutes. Next month Margo Day might not want to assassinate you. Even next week. But today she means what she says."

There was a lot of sense in what Wilt said, and Breeli made due allowance for it. Normal women with normal instincts, whatever their race, found cold hate difficult to preserve along with growing affection. Wilt's Nancy had probably started out with the attitude which Margo had forcefully expressed, but now . . . yes, Wilt was probably right. About Nancy and about Margo.

"Send Margo Day to me," Breeli said.

"Yes, sir," said Wilt disapprovingly.

It was very pleasant.

It gave Breeli no answers.

Nor, in the days that passed, did Breeli find any simple solution to his problem.

In a military sense, Earth was submissive. There weren't even riots. The countries of the world went about their business, for the most part ignoring the Pastan conquest. Earth's economic, social and political systems hadn't been as easily upset as Breeli had feared.

But every day, somewhere, despite their shields, four or five Pastan soldiers died. Usually four or five Terrans died with them. But Earth could afford it, not being at the end of a light-years-long supply and reinforcements line.

The plain fact was, Earth didn't want to be occupied.

Once Breeli said to Dorothy Green: "If I wanted to have a conference with Earth's leaders, could you arrange it? How long would you need?"

"You can tell me anything you want communicated to the Terran governments, sir."

"Yes, but I might want to see them myself."

"I'm chief liaison officer, sir." There was mild reproof in her tone.

"I know that. But what if I have an offer to make?"

"You can make it to me, sir."

And with that Breeli had to be content. He made no offer. He didn't know what to offer.

SEEING no harm in it, he issued an order permitting intermarriage. One of the first to take advantage of this was Lieutenant Wilt, who married his Nancy. Breeli attended the wedding and kissed the bride. Wilt was right — Nancy was a pretty girl. Not a Margo Day, but pretty.

Seeing them together, Breeli didn't think Nancy could possibly be playing a part.

As far as he could, Breeli kept

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out of Prani's way because he knew that whatever happened he was Prani's executioner. Breeli had no choice about that — only about the manner and date of Prani's trial.

He made a lot of visits to various parts of the world, accompanied by Margo and a suitable number of guards.

In Hawaii Margo said: "Come for a swim, sire. I'll find out where you're most likely to be eaten by a shark."

In the Swiss Alps she said: "Let's climb a mountain, sire, and I'll push you off."

In Brazil she stopped calling him "sire." Knowing she used the title as an insult, Breeli had steadfastly refused to comment on it one way or the other. But when she started calling him Breel — the "I" on the end of his name was titular — he began to suspect that even if she got the chance to assassinate him, she wouldn't.

In Australia she said: "Do you really need all these guards, Breel? I'm getting tired of sleeping six in a bed."

This was exaggeration. Breeli never slept in the same room as she did, but apart from refusing to let her near him when he was asleep, he took no special precautions against her.

In England he gave her a chance to kill him and she didn't take it.

In Florida she said: "Yes, Breel, I'll marry you."

She insisted on fixing the date of the wedding, which for a moment made him suspicious again. Assassinations had tailed off lately. Intuitively, when she picked the following Friday, he suspected that something was due to happen on Friday.

Suppose a Terran coup of some kind had been planned. Surprise would be essential, for the Pastans had decisively overcome all Earth's resistance once, and could do it again. And if such a coup had been planned, Margo, given the chance to assassinate the Consolidation Officer, might very well refrain.

"You're up to something," he said.

"Look, Breel," she said. "We'd better get one thing straight. If I marry you, I'll mean it. I'll go anywhere with you. I'll become as Pastan as you are. There's nothing new in that. Lots of girls have married former enemies. Once we're married, you can trust me."

"I believe all that. But you make me more certain than ever that something's going to happen between now and Friday."

She laughed in the old mocking way and said nothing.

IN the night he tossed and turned uneasily, and at last opened his eyes and looked at

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Margo, sleeping peacefully beside him. The moonlight which shone through the uncurtained window rimlit the lovely satin skin of cheek, shoulder and breast. For a week now he had trusted her to the extent of sleeping with her.

He loved her and he was all but certain she loved him. Yet he knew his duty was to find out whatever it was she knew, however he had to do it.

She knew something and had hardly bothered to deny it. When they had talked hours ago, things had been easy, comfortable between them, and it had been more or less a joke that Margo wouldn't tell him what was on her mind.

In the stillness of the night, it was clear that it was no joke. He ought to turn her over to the psychologists to have whatever she knew pried out of her.

He got up and paced about the bedroom restlessly. Aside from the time when the car he was in had been blown to pieces, his stay on Earth had been too pleasant, too easy, too spuriously comfortable. He hadn't seen any shooting, fighting, dying. Any killing he heard of, except that one incident, had been offstage.

Yet he knew that the Terrans had a passionate love of liberty and would do anything to drive the invaders from their world. The only reason for their present comparative passiveness was that there was nothing they could do against the diverter, and they knew it. They could attack every one of the Pastan Army's bases and installations from all directions at once, but if they did so, they'd simply be shut out until the Pastans were ready to strike back, and then get beaten as decisively as before. They knew it. That was why the occupation was apparently peaceful.

There remained the fact that Prani had immorally and illegally attacked and conquered a Nineteenth Level world, and Breeli still hadn't the ghost of an idea what to do about it.

He had never had a survey made to establish beyond doubt what the Terrans' cultural level actually was. The reason was that it was still possible to pretend that Earth was Seventeenth Level, although the pretense was pretty thin.

After a survey, it would no longer be possible.

"Come back to bed, darling," Margo muttered sleepily.

"What's going to happen on Friday?" he demanded.

"Friday?" She smiled without opening her eyes. "I'm going to get married."

Long after she was asleep, Breeli stared at her. Finally he told himself he was imagining things.

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ALTHOUGH marriage hadn't long been permitted between Pastans and Terrans, already nearly half the occupying forces had married Terran girls. It wasn't really surprising — only single men were sent on occupation duties, except for top brass like General Prani.

The strange thing was that the Terrans seemed to regard Pastan-Terran marriage as a joke.

When it was announced that Governor Breeli was to marry Margo Day, cartoons depicting him and Margo in improbable attitudes appeared in most Terran newspapers. They were never actually obscene or libelous. But Breeli learned how astute Terran newspapermen could be in establishing just how far they could go, and then go there with barely a millimeter to spare.

Breeli found Margo at the pool chuckling over a cartoon in one of the New York papers. It depicted a very glamorous Margo with an unglamorous Breeli at her feet and the Earth at Breeli's.

"Is that funny?" he asked.

"I think so. You wouldn't."

"I'm supposed to have a sense of humor."

"The man who gets a custard pie in his face never thinks it's funny."

"Is marrying you like getting a custard pie in my face?"

She sobered. "You don't really mind, Breel? I didn't think it would bother you."

"It doesn't. But I didn't expect to find you laughing at a thing like that."

"Well, you at my feet, and the Earth at yours . . . Every girl wants to marry a prince, especially Americans, who sneer at princes, and you're a sort of prince. Tell me, is the wedding off?"

He looked at her. She wore a deep green swimsuit which brought out all her vivid coloring. He had had plenty of opportunity to tire of her, but the result had been quite the opposite. He reached for her.

Feeling her stiffen, he cast a glance over his shoulder. He blinked incredulously. Dorothy Green, most unexpectedly clad in a white two-piece swimsuit, and smiling, was coming to join them. She looked more like a bean-pole than usual.

"Mind if I talk to you?" she asked Breeli.

"Go right ahead," said Margo viciously, and jumped to her feet and walked away.

Breeli stared after her.

"What got into Margo?" he asked.

Dorothy sat by the edge of the pool where Margo had been. "She's a patriot," she said indifferently. "Patriots can't be expected to like me."

"But she's marrying me. I'm a

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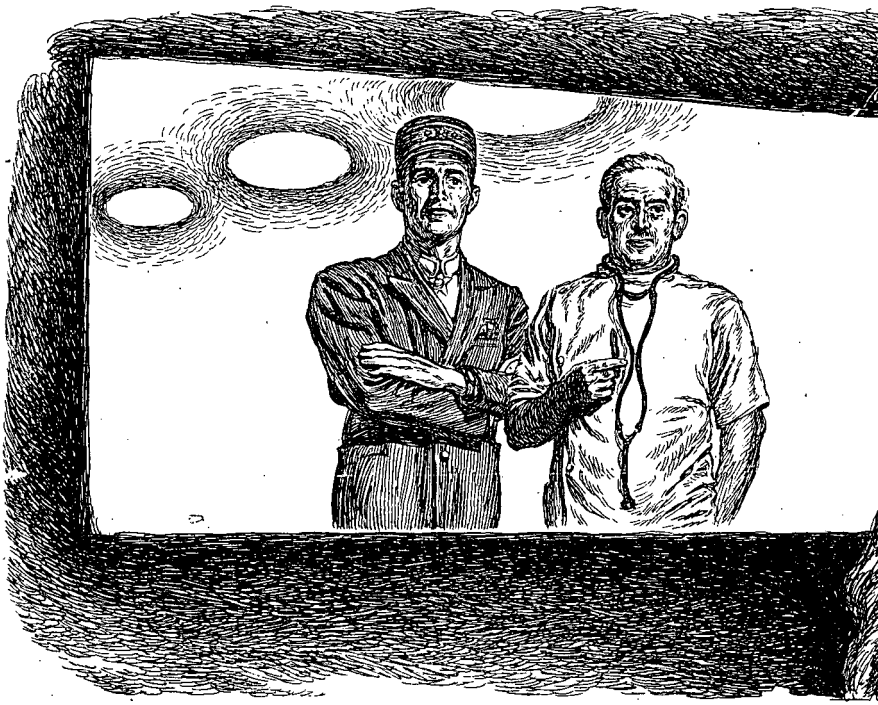

Pastan. Why should she hate you for working with Pastans?"

Dorothy shrugged. "I thought you understood people, Governor. Does anyone like a traitor — even the people who *use* the traitor?"

"But you're not . . . well, never mind. What do you want to talk about?"

It was the wedding, of course. Dorothy was in charge of security arrangements. For ten minutes they discussed the matter as impersonally as if it were a cattle show. Breeli agreed that a Terran church wedding would be best, with a Pastan ceremony back on Pasta later.

At the end of ten minutes, finding Dorothy brighter and more sympathetic than usual, Breeli asked: "What kind of wedding did you have?"

A spasm crossed her face. "Please. We're concerned only with you and Margo Day."

"We could arrange to have your husband present if you like."

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ONCE more passion flamed in her eyes. She jumped to her feet exactly as Margo had done, and was going to hurry away likewise. But Breeli caught her around the waist and pulled her down again. It was like handling an undernourished child.

"Dorothy," he said, "is there something I don't know about your husband? Was he wounded in the fighting? Has he been badly treated? Or what?"

Her passion died, and her small breasts stopped heaving. "You don't know?" she whispered. "I thought you did, I thought . . . I apologize, Governor. No, it wasn't anything to do with the fighting. Long before that, Jack was . . . sick."

"What do you mean, sick?"

"His mind . . . if you must have it in plain language, Governor, he's out of his mind. No, he isn't badly treated. In fact, one of the reasons I took this job was because he'd be treated better as a

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hostage, better looked after, than I could afford otherwise."

"But why hasn't he been cured?"

"Incurable, Governor." There was a world of grief in her voice.

"Brain damage?"

"No. I'm not a psychologist, Governor, and anyway, I'd rather not talk about it. There's a Pastan doctor at the internment camp, a Dr. Morn. Ask him."

Breeli stood up. "I will. Dorothy, if I've said anything that hurt you, I'm sorry. I didn't know about this."

He had himself driven to the camp and saw Jack Green through one-way glass. Dorothy's husband was a tall, massive young man who sat very still and stared at the floor.

"Manic-depressive," Dr. Morn explained, turning away. "A very sad case. I've requested permission to treat him, but so far I've had no reply. I presume my request is shuttling back and forth along a series of muddy ruts known as the usual channels."

"Could you cure him?"

"Within a week."

"Then go ahead. You have permission now."

"Thank you. These Terrans have a wry saying: Better late than never."

"Have you any idea, Doctor, why the Terrans left him like that? Is he some kind of criminal or outcast?"

Dr. Morn raised his eyebrows quizzically. "Do you mean you don't know? Haven't you seen my report?"

"It, too, is probably shuttling through the usual channels," said Breeli drily. "What was it about?"

"The Terrans haven't cured him because they can't. Though a very advanced people in many ways, they're backward in psychological medicine."

Breeli stared at him. "You mean they can't cure neuroses? But I haven't seen an uncompensated neurotic yet."

"You wouldn't. They're really a remarkably stable race — which, perhaps, is why psychological medicine has lagged among them. Really serious neurosis is comparatively rare. But when it does occur, they can't do a thing about it."

"So, unless you took a hand, Jack Green would be like that for the rest of his life?"

"Yes."

"His wife, Doctor — have you met his wife?"

"Yes." The doctor sighed. "A remarkably plain girl, in a world of such feminine pulchritude. However, she's gone through a lot of unnecessary misery."

"Didn't you tell her he could be cured?"

"Until I was permitted to do so, I hardly thought it humane to tell her I could."

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"No, of course not. And by the same token, I won't tell her what's going on until he *is* cured. Will you send him to HQ when the cure is complete, Dr. Morn? I'll take the responsibility."

The doctor looked puzzled. "But why not tell her now?"

"And get her so hopeful that she has no thought for — collaboration? That's not practical politics, Doctor."

IT wasn't until he was almost back at HQ that the significance of Dr. Morn's explanation detonated under Breeli like the bomb which had nearly killed him.

The Eighteenth Level was the level of stability. It was the level of culture at which a race learned to repair its own mental disorders.

The Terrans were an exceptionally stable race, though quite possibly they themselves didn't think so. Neurotics among them generally managed to compensate without treatment. Though they remained neurotics, they seldom reached the state at which treatment, in a Pastan world, would have been compulsory.

Consequently the Terrans had, in effect, reached the Nineteenth Level by a different route from the usual one. From the standard point of view, they were Nineteenth Level; there was no doubt about that.

But part of the definition of the rise from Seventeenth to Eighteenth Level was the development of practical psychological medicine.

Technically, the Terrans were Seventeenth Level and the conquest of Earth had been quite in order.

It was a technicality, of course, Put on the right track, Terran psychologists could develop the necessary techniques in a matter of months. Then, by any standards, they would be Nineteenth Level.

But it was all Breeli needed. Now he could whitewash Prani and the conquest of Earth and anything else he liked. There would be no need to mention that he'd spent weeks on Earth before learning about the gap.

He almost danced into HQ.

"General," he said with more cordiality then he had shown since the moment he met Prani, "you're saved. The Terrans are Seventeenth Level."

Prani was affronted. "Sir, you know very well they're Nineteenth. No Seventeenth Level race could have fought such battles. Modesty apart, I may say —"

"General," said Breeli with only mild exasperation, "if you follow that line, you're dead. Your only hope is to let me show that the Terrans are Seventeenth Level. Now are you going to do as I say, or do I have to relieve you of your command?"

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"Sir!" The general went white, then red, then mottled.

"I can do it, you know."

"Yes, sir, I know, but —"

"All right, then. I have reason to believe that something's brewing. I don't know what, but it doesn't matter. As of ten minutes from now, all bases will be closed until further notice. Recall all personnel. Set diverters to exclude bombs, shells, gas, men, women, children and all animals, insects and bacteria. Transmit these orders through Pastan personnel, not through Dorothy Green, or any other Green or Dorothy. The only contact between Pastans and Terrans in the next few days will be the marriage of myself and Margo."

"But that's the first thing to cancel, sir! If there's really going to be a revolt, there must be plans for your assassination at the ceremony!"

"I don't think so. But I'll warn Dorothy and Margo that if there are, it'll be the worst mistake Earth ever made."

WITH some difficulty Breeli found Dr. Morn's report, stuck fast in a bottleneck. He read it with interest.

The Terrans, like all races which didn't have psychotherapy that really worked, were all more or less off balance. That didn't make them much different from any other highly developed race, or the Pastans themselves, for every advanced civilization permitted a lot of personal liberty, which meant that only dangerous psychotics could be compulsorily treated. Earth achieved much the same practical result by shutting dangerous psychotics away in asylums or prisons.

But the Terrans were conscious of the deficiency and uneasy about it. There were experiments in rehabilitation — idealistic, dangerous experiments when no practical psychotherapeutic techniques existed.

The Terrans would be very glad to have a psychotherapy which worked.

Seeing all his troubles dissolving, Breeli once more felt like dancing. When he met Margo in one of the corridors, he did literally dance into his office with her.

"What's got into you, Breel?" she asked breathlessly.

"I've just found the key!" he cried.

"What key?"

"The key to Terran-Pastan cooperation. Friendship. Peace. Alliance."

"Isn't that a bit optimistic?"

"No. After we're married, I'll tell you about it."

"I think you'd better tell me now."

He grinned at her. "Margo, I don't care what you've got up your sleeve. I've got something bigger."

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She looked at him thoughtfully. "You've got something that's going to put you in a strong position?"

"Yes."

"Then maybe it had better wait. You're going to need it."

He sobered. "Margo, I'm trusting you. If there's anything funny about the ceremony, your world will regret it for generations. That's not a threat. It's a friendly warning."

"Didn't I promise it would go off according to plan?"

"Yes, but long ago you told me you'd promise anything I liked, and I'd be a fool to believe you. Didn't you?"

She was hurt. "Why are you marrying me if you don't trust me?"

"Because you're beautiful and I love you."

"Is that the right order of importance?"

"No. Honestly, Margo, I don't think you'd betray me."

She looked at him with troubled eyes.

THE wedding of Margo Day and Consolidation Officer Breeli — or Governor Breeli, as he was known to the Terrans — was a big propaganda occasion.

It took place in St. Clement's Church in a small town near Prani's headquarters. Film and television cameras were there in force. Margo and Breeli were attended by nearly all the Pastans who had married Terrans, and Terrans who had married Pastans — a large congregation. That had been Dorothy Green's inspiration.

Margo looked ravishing in pink. Breeli wore a Terran suit. Dorothy Green was matron of honor.

The Reverend Thaddeus White had refused to perform the ceremony until he had a chat with Breeli about religion. Finding that the Pastan view of a Divine Purpose was not so different, he had withdrawn his objections and agreed to officiate.

Nothing untoward happened until Margo and Breeli left the church. Then Breeli was rather surprised to find Dorothy coming into their car with them.

"Do we need a chaperon?" he asked Margo.

"Mr. Breeli," said Dorothy, as the car started, "you are no longer governor. You and Margo are being deported at once."

Breeli smiled. "Tell me more."

"I'm sorry about this, Breel," Margo said, "but I did want to marry you, and I also wanted to free Earth. That's why it was timed this way. I'm coming with you to the spaceport."

"And what are you going to do about the Pastan bases all over Earth?"

"We're not going to do anything," said Dorothy calmly. "We've done it."

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For the first time Breeli became anxious. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"Well, it's been a fairly bloodless victory," Dorothy Green said. "We don't want another war. But you're reasonable people. Now that we have the diverter, I don't think you'll want to —"

"You have the *diverter?*"

Dorothy shrugged. "Well, how long did you think it would take us to crack it? An hour ago, we cancelled all diverter fields, and thousands of men walked into every Pastan base and took over. There were hardly any casualties. I'm sorry to report that General Prani is dead—he wasn't very good with weapons, I'm afraid. We're sending you and every Pastan officer or soldier who married a Terran girl back to Pasta, and keeping everybody else prisoner. I think we should be able to reach agreement after you've reported the facts to your government and come back to arrange terms."

Breeli began to laugh silently. Prani's death was unfortunate, but it would simplify matters. It was ironic that as soon as Breeli had discovered Earth was technically a Seventeenth Level world, and the conquest was therefore justified, they should pull something like this.

Margo was laughing too, puzzled but prepared to share the joke. Dorothy was merely puzzled.

"Tell the driver to take us to HQ," Breeli said.

"We're taking you to the spaceport. You're to be—"

"I know. Let's go to HQ all the same. I'm expecting somebody there."

"You're not Governor Breeli any more," Dorothy said again. "You don't give the orders —"

"I'm expecting Jack Green," Breeli said.

That passion in her eyes again, she grabbed Breeli's shoulders. "What have you done to him?"

"Tell the driver," Breeli said.

She did so.

HEADQUARTERS looked the same, except that there were no Pastans about, only Terrans, mostly men, none of whom Breeli had ever seen before. A tall, broad Terran colonel called Armstrong seemed to be in charge.

"Well done," Breeli congratulated him. "A very well-planned operation."

"Thank you," said the colonel, surprised but courteous. "What are you doing here?"

Breeli had Margo on one arm and Dorothy on the other. "Frankly, this maneuver of yours comes at a very convenient time. I'm glad it was comparatively bloodless, though. I couldn't have condoned a massacre. Now that this has happened, I think we should withdraw in force. Only don't you think it

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would be better if the Pastans who have married Terran women remain here, and all the others go home?"

"You don't seem to understand the situation," said Armstrong. "We're in command now."

"Perhaps," Breeli admitted. "But the Pastans with Terran sympathies are the obvious ones to stay here while the agreements are arranged. Margo and I will go, but not for long. We'll be back."

The colonel's courtesy was wearing thin. "Mr. Breeli, we don't want a state of perpetual warfare between Earth and Pasta. That's why we planned a coup with as few casualties as possible on either side. But —"

"But we still have something to offer," Breeli said, "a high card to play." His gaze rose over Dorothy's head. She turned and gasped.

Jack Green strode to her and took her in his arms. There was something in his appearance, his bearing, that showed he was a whole man again.

Suddenly the unfeminine Dorothy Green became very feminine.

"Was that your key?" Margo demanded.

"Yes. Won't Earth be grateful for sanity? No more psychopaths. You'll be able to get by with almost no prisons and much smaller asylums. We can't do anything for congenital defects, I'm afraid, but aside from that, only physical brain damage is beyond our skill."

The colonel was out of his depth. Dorothy, however, once she had recovered from the altogether pleasant shock, became chief liaison officer very strongly biased in Breeli's favor.

"Shall we go into your office, Mr. Breeli?" she asked, still in Jack Green's arms.

IN the end, as Breeli had suggested, it was the Pastans who had not married Terran women who returned immediately to their own world. Some of them were very reluctant to go.

Margo and Nancy were the only Terrans to leave with them. Breeli was not unaware of the effect they were going to have on Pastan TV.

The arrangements had been easy because Earth had prudently decided not to be difficult, realizing that if Pasta's tail were tweaked too violently, Earth might still be reconquered.

"You seem happy," Margo said as the Pastan ship prepared to make the first hyperspace jump.

"I am," said Breeli. "I'm going on my honeymoon. And you should see my bride!"

"You don't care that we won in the end?"

He wondered whether to tell her the truth, and decided against it. It wouldn't make any Terran any happier to know that the brief war had been unnecessary, that those

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who had died shouldn't have died. Let Margo believe, as Breeli's superior's would believe, that Earth had been a paradox, a Seventeenth Level world that went straight to Nineteenth when Pastan psychologists told them a few things they ought to have seen for themselves long ago.

He kissed her instead.

SHE released herself. "Breel, I've got a confession to make."

"You needn't bother," he said. "I figured it out long ago."

She gasped.

"And I don't mind," he added. "Why should I?"

"I didn't think you would, because it's what *you* think that matters. But how did you know?"

"You went too far trying to hide it. Destroying all old publications and films . . ."

"Yes, but if any Pastan had seen one, he'd have known —"

"Perhaps. But girls like you and Helen Krauss and the others *were* brave, and you were necessary to Earth's plans. We had to take Terran mistresses or you'd never have been able to find out the things you did. Only somebody thought we'd better not know that the Terran girls we happened to admire weren't the ones Terrans regarded as glamor girls. It wouldn't have made any difference, Margo. You — and the Rubens and Greek nudes — would still have appealed to us."

"That's what's so wonderful," she said. "You'd never believe how nice it is to find people who think you're beautiful after knowing all your life that —"

Breeli shook his head. "You're perfect."

"Glad you think so." And she meant it.

"They must have found out very early," Breeli said, "that we were attracted to the Rubens type. And they thought something might be made of the fact. So they carefully prevented us from finding out the kind of girls *they* were attracted to. They needn't have bothered. We must have seen some of the girls they think are beautiful, and didn't give them a second glance."

"You did," said Margo.

"Who, for instance?"

"Dorothy Green."

"You're not going to tell me *she's* the Terran idea of a glamor girl!"

"Six years ago," said Margo, "she was Miss America — just before she married Jack Green."

— J. T. McINTOSH

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JAMIESON

By BILL DOEDE

A Konv cylinder was the key to space — but there was one power it could not match!

Illustrated by GRAY

THEY lived in a small house beside the little Wolf river in Wisconsin. Once it had been a summer cottage owned by a rich man from Chicago. The rich man died. His heirs sold it. Now it was well insulated and Mrs. Jamieson and her son were very comfortable, even in the coldest winter. During the summer they rented a few row boats to vacationing fishermen, and she had built a few overnight cabins beside the road. They were able to make ends meet.

Her neighbors knew nothing of the money she had brought with her to Wisconsin. They didn't even know that she was not a native. She never spoke of it, except at first, when Earl was a boy of seven and they had just come there to live. Then she only said that she came

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from the East. She knew the names of eastern Wisconsin towns, and small facts about them; it lent an air of authenticity to her claim of being a native. Actually her previous residence was Bangkok, Siam, where the Agents had killed her husband.

That was back in '07, on the eve of his departure for Alpha Centaurus; but she never spoke of this; and she was very careful not to move from place to place except by the conventional methods of travel.

Also, she wore her hair long, almost to the shoulders. People said, "There goes one of the old-fashioned ones. That hair-do was popular back in the sixties." They did not suspect that she did this only to cover the thin, pencil-line scar, evidence that a small cylinder lay under her skin behind the ear.

For Mrs. Jamieson was one of the Konvs.

Her husband had been one of the small group who developed this tiny instrument. Not the inventor —*his* name was Stinson, and the effects produced by it were known as the Stinson Effect. In appearance it resembled a small semi-conductor device. Analysis by the best scientific minds proved it to be a semiconductor.

Yet it held the power to move a body instantly from one point in space to any other point. Each unit was custom built, keyed to operate only by the thought pattern of the particular individual.

Several times in the past seven years Mrs. Jamieson had seen other Konvs, and had been tempted to identify herself and say, "Here I am. You are one of them; so am I. Come, and we'll talk. We'll talk about Stinson and Benjamin, who helped them all get away. And Doctor Straus. And my husband, E. Mason Jamieson, who never got away because those filthy, unspeakable Agents shot him in the back, there in that coffee shop in Bangkok, Siam."

ONCE, in the second year after her husband's death, an Agent came and stayed in one of her cabins.

She learned that he was an Agent completely by accident. While cleaning the cabin one morning his badge fell out of a shirt pocket. She stood still, staring at the horror of it there on the floor, the shirt in her hands, all the loneliness returning in a black wave of hate and frustration.

That night she soundlessly lifted the screen from the window over his bed and shot him with a .22 rifle.

She threw the weapon into the river. It helped very little. He was one Agent, only one out of all the thousands of Agents all over Earth; while her husband had been one of twenty-eight persons. She decided then that her efforts would

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be too ineffective. The odds were wrong. She would wait until her son, Earl, was grown.

Together they would seek revenge. He did not have the cylinder — not yet. But he would. The Konvs took care of their own.

Her husband had been one of the first, and they would not forget. One day the boy would disappear for a few hours. When he returned the small patch of gauze would be behind his ear. She would shield him until the opening healed. Then no one would ever know, because now they could do it without leaving the tell-tale scar. Then they would seek revenge.

Later they would go to Alpha Centaurus, where a life free from Agents could be lived.

It happened to Earl one hot summer day when he was fourteen. Mrs. Jamieson was working in her kitchen; Earl supposedly was swimming with his friends in the river. Suddenly he appeared before her, completely nude. At sight of his mother his face paled and he began to shake violently, so that she was forced to slap him to prevent hysteria. She looked behind his ear.

It was there.

"Mom!" he cried. "Mom!"

He went to the window and looked out toward the river, where his friends were still swimming in the river, with great noise and delight. Apparently they did not miss him. Mrs. Jamieson handed him a pair of trousers. "Here, get yourself dressed. Then we'll talk."

HE started for his room, but she stopped him. "No, do it right here. You may as well get used to it now."

"Get used to what?"

"To people seeing you nude."

"What?"

"Never mind. What happened just now?"

"I was swimming in the river, and a man came down to the river. His hair was all white, and his eyes looked like . . . well, I never saw eyes like his before. He asked who was Earl Jamieson, and I said I was. Then he said, 'Come with me.' I went with him. I don't know why. It seemed the right thing. He took me to a car and there was another man in it, that looked like the first one only he was bigger. We went to a house, not far away and went inside. And that's all I can remember until I woke up. I was on a table, sort of. A high table. There was a light over it. It was all strange, and the two men stood there talking in some language I don't know."

Earl ran his hand through his hair, shaking his head. "I don't remember clearly, I guess. I was looking around the room and I remember thinking how scared I was, and how nice it would be to be here with you. And then I was here."

Earl faced the window, looking out, then turned quickly back.

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"What is it?" he asked, desperately. "What happened to me?"

"Better put your trousers on," Mrs. Jamieson said. "It's something very unusual and terrible to think of at first, but really wonderful."

"But what happened? What is this patch behind my ear?"

Suddenly his face paled and he stopped in the act of getting into his trousers. "Guess I know now. They made me a Konv."

"Well, don't take on so. You'll get used to it."

"But they shouldn't have! They didn't even ask me!"

He started for the door, but she called him back. "No, don't run away from it now. This is the time to face it. There are two sides to every story, you know. You hear only one side in school — their side. There is also *our* side."

He turned back, a dawning comprehension showing in his eyes. "That's right, you're one, too. That is why you killed that Agent in the third cabin."

It was her turn to be surprised. "You knew about that?"

"I saw you. I wasn't sleeping. I was afraid to stay inside alone, so I followed you. I never told anyone."

"But you were only nine!"

"They would have taken you away if I'd said anything."

Mrs. Jamieson held out her hand. "Come here, son. It's time I told you about us."

So he sat across the kitchen table from her, and she told the whole history, beginning with Stinson sitting in the laboratory in New Jersey, holding in his hand a small cylinder moulded from silicon with controlled impurities. He had made it, looking for a better micro-circuit structure. He was holding this cylinder . . . and it was a cold day outside . . . and he was dreaming of a sunny Florida beach—

And suddenly he was there, on the beach. He could not believe it at first. He felt the sand and water, and felt of himself; there was no mistake.

On the plane back to New Jersey he came to certain conclusions regarding the strange power of his device. He tried it again, secretly. Then he made more cylinders. He was the only man in the world who knew how to construct it, and he kept the secret, giving cylinders to selected people. He worked out the basic principle, calling it a kinetic ordinate of negative vortices, which was very undefinitive.

It was a subject of wonder and much speculation, but no one took serious notice of them until one night a federal Agent arrested one man for indecency. It was a valid charge. One disadvantage of this method of travel was that, while a body could travel instantaneously to any chosen spot, it arrived without clothes.

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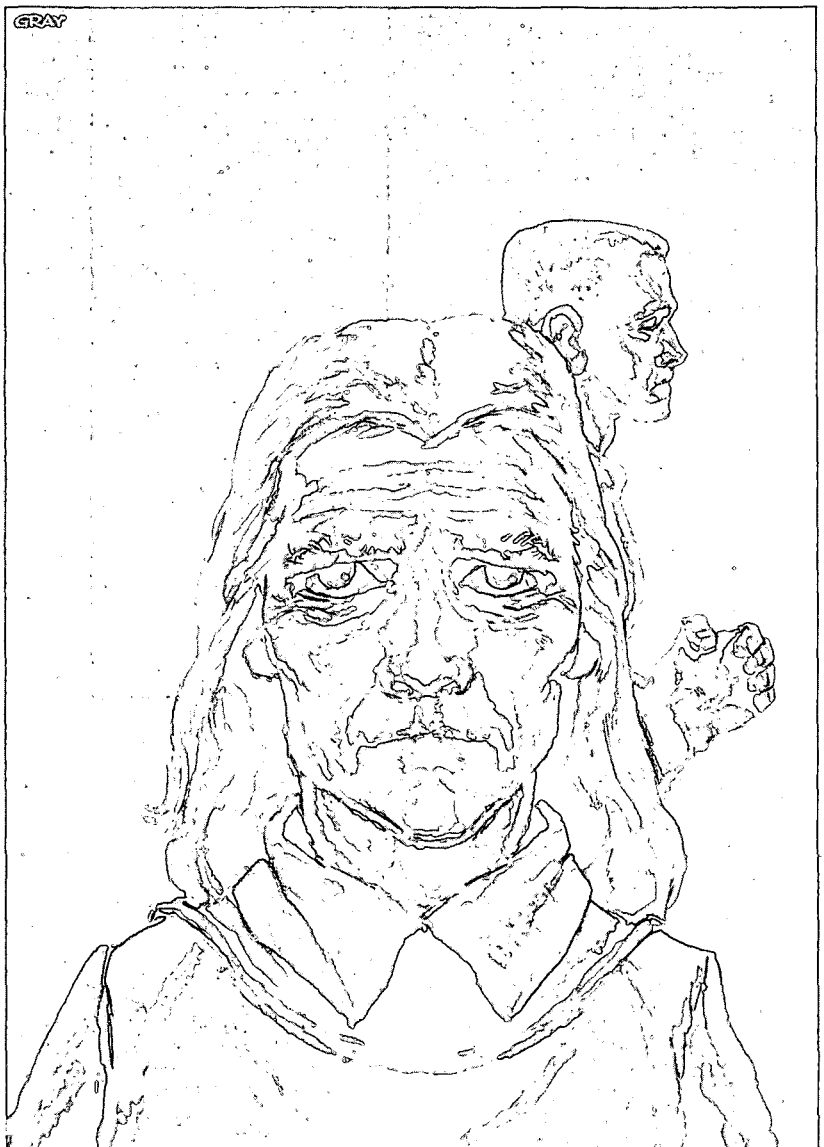

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The arrested man disappeared from his jail cell, and the next morning the Agent was found strangled to death in his bed. This set off a campaign against Konvs. One base act led to another, until the original reason for noticing them at all was lost. Normal men no longer thought of them as human.

Mrs. Jamieson told how Stinson, knowing he had made too many cylinders and given them unwisely, left Earth for Alpha Centaurus.

He went alone, not knowing if he could go so far, or what he would find when he arrived. But he did arrive, and it was what he had sought.

He returned for the others. They gathered one night in a dirty, broken-down farmhouse in Missouri—and disappeared in a body, leaving the Agents standing helplessly on Earth, shaking their fists at the sky.

"You have asked many times," Mrs. Jamieson said, "how your father died. Now I will tell you the truth. Your father was one of the great ones, along with Stinson and Benjamin and Dr. Straus. He helped plan the escape; but the Agents found him in Bangkok fifteen minutes before the group left. They shot him in the back, and the others had to go on without him. Now do you know why I killed the Agent in the third cabin? I had to. Your father was a great man, and I loved him."

"I don't blame you, mother," Earl said simply. "But we are freaks. Everybody says, 'Konv' as if it is something dirty. They write it on the walls in rest rooms."

"Of course they do — because they don't understand! They are afraid of us. Wouldn't you be afraid of someone who could do the things we do, if you *couldn't* do them?"

Just like that, it was over.

That is, the first shock was over. Mrs. Jamieson watched Earl leave the house, walking slowly along the river, a boy with a man's problems. His friends called to him from the river, but he chose not to hear. He wanted to be alone. He needed to think, to feel the newness of the thing.

Perhaps he would cross the river and enter the deep forest there. When the initial shock wore off he might experiment with his new power. He would not travel far, in these first attempts. Probably he would stay within walking distance of his clothes, because he still lacked the tricks others had learned.

It was a hot, mucky afternoon with storm clouds pushing out of the west. Mrs. Jamieson put on her swimming suit and wandered down to the river to cool herself.

FOR the remainder of that summer they worked together. They practiced at night mostly, taking longer and longer jumps, un-

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til Earl's confidence allowed him to reach any part of the Earth he chose. She knew the habits of Agents. She knew how to avoid them.

They would select a spot sufficiently remote to insure detection, she would devise some prank to irritate the Agents; then they would quickly return to Wisconsin. The Agents would rush to the calculated spot, but would find only the bare footprints of a woman and a boy. They would swear and drive back to their offices to dig through files, searching for some clue to their identity.

It was inevitable that they should identify Mrs. Jamieson as one of the offenders, since they had discovered, even before Stinson took his group to Centaurus, that individuals had thought patterns peculiar to themselves. These could be identified, if caught on their detectors, and even recorded for the files. But the files proved confusing, for they said that Mrs. Jamieson had gone to Centaurus with the others.

Had she returned to Earth? The question did not trouble them long. They had more serious problems. Stinson had selected only the best of the Konvs when he left Earth, leaving all those with criminal tendencies behind. They could have followed if they chose — what could stop them? But it was more lucrative to stay. On Earth they could rob, loot, even murder — without fear of the law.

Earl changed.

Even before the summer was over, he matured. The childish antics of his friends began to bore him. "Be careful, Earl," his mother would say. "Remember who you are. Play with them sometimes, even if you don't like it. You have a long way to go before you will be ready."

During the long winter evenings, after they had watched their favorite video programs, they would sit by the fireplace. "Tell me about the great ones," he would say, and she would repeat all the things she remembered about Stinson and Benjamin and Straus. She never tired of discussing them. She would tell about Benjamin's wife, Lisa, and try to describe the horror in Lisa's young mind when the news went out that E. Mason Jamieson had been killed. She wanted him to learn as much as possible about his father's death, knowing that soon the Agents would be after Earl. They were so clever, so persistent. She wanted him to be ready, not only in ways of avoiding their traps . . . but ready with a heart full of hate.

Sometimes when she talked about her husband, Mrs. Jamieson wanted to stand up and scream at her son, "Hate, hate! Hate! You must learn to hate!" But she clenched her hands over her knit-

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ting, knowing that he would learn it faster if she avoided the word.

THE winter passed, and the next summer, and two more summers.

Earl was ready for college. They had successfully kept their secret. They had been vigilant in every detail. Earl referred to the "damn Agents" now with a curl of his lip. They had been successful in contacting other Konvs, and sometimes visited them at a remote rendezvous.

"When you have finished college," Mrs. Jamieson told her son, "we will go to Centaurus."

"Why not now?"

"Because when you get there they will need men who can contribute to the development of the planet. Stinson is a physicist, Benjamin a metallurgist, Straus a doctor. But Straus is an old man by this time. A young doctor will be needed. Study hard, Earl. Learn all you can. Even the great ones get sick."

She did not mention her secret hope, that before they left Earth he would have fully avenged his father's death. He was clever and intelligent.

He could kill many Agents.

So she exhumed the money she had hidden more than ten years before. The house beside the Little Wolf river was sold. They found a modest bungalow within walking distance of the University's medical school. Mrs. Jamieson furnished it carefully but, oddly, rather lavishly.

This was her husband's money she was spending now. It needed to last only a few years. Then they would leave Earth forever.

A room was built on the east side of the bungalow, with its own private entrance. This was Earl's room. Ostensibly the private entrance was for convenience due to the irregular hours of college students.

It was also convenient for coming home late at night after Agent hunting.

Mrs. Jamieson was becoming obvious.

Excitement brought color to her cheeks when she thought of Earl facing one of them—a lean, cunning jaguar facing a fat, lazy bear. It was her notion that federal Agents were evil creatures, tools of a decadent, bloodthirsty society, living off the fat of the land.

She painted the room herself, in soft, pastel colors. When it was finished she showed Earl regally into the room, making a big joke of it.

"Here you can study and relax, and have those bull sessions students are always having," she said.

"There will be no friends," he answered, "not here. No Konvs will be at the university."

"Why not? Stinson selected only educated, intelligent people. When one dies the cylinder is taken and

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adjusted to a new thought pattern — usually a person from the same family. I would say it is very likely that Konvs will be found here."

HE shook his head. "No. They knew we were coming, and no one said a word about others being here. I'm afraid we are alone."

"Well, I think not," she said firmly. "Anyway, the room will be comfortable."

He shook his head again. "Why can't I be in the house with you? There are two bedrooms."

She said quickly, "You can if you wish. I just thought you'd like being alone, at your age. Most boys do."

"I'm not like most boys, mother. The Konvs saw to that. Sometimes I'm sorry. Back in high school I used to wish I was like the others. Do you remember Lorane Peters?" His mother nodded. "Well, when we were seniors last year she liked me quite a lot. She didn't say so, but I knew it. She would sit across the aisle from me, and sometimes when I saw how her hair fell over her face when she read, I wanted to lean over and whisper to her, 'Hey, Lorrie—' just as if I was human — 'can I take you to the basketball game?'"

Mrs. Jamieson turned to leave the room, but he stopped her. "You understand what I'm saying, don't you?"

"No, I don't!" she said sharply. "You're old enough to face realities. You are a Konv. You always will be a Konv. *Have you forgotten your own father?*"

She turned her back and slammed the door. Earl stood very still for a long time in the room that was to have been happy for him. She was crying just beyond the wall.

Earl did not use the room that first year. He slept in the second bedroom. He did not mention his frustrated desires to be normal, not after the first attempt, but he persisted in his efforts to be so. Use of the cylinder was out of the question for them now, anyway.

In the spring Mrs. Jamieson caught a virus cold which resulted in a long convalescence. Earl moved into the new bedroom. At first she thought he moved in an effort to please her because of the illness, but she soon grew aware of her mistake.

One day he disappeared.

MRS. Jamieson was alarmed. Had the Agents found him? She watched the papers daily for some word of Konvs being killed.

The second day after his disappearance she found a small item. A Konv had raided the Agent's office in Stockholm, killing three, and getting killed himself. Mrs. Jamieson dropped the paper immediately and went to Stockholm. She did not consider the risk. In Stockholm she

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found clothes and made discreet inquiries. The slain man had been a Finnish Konv, one of those left behind by Stinson as an undesirable. His wife had been killed by the Agents the week before. He had gone completely insane and made the raid singlehanded. Mrs. Jamieson read the account of crimes committed by the man and his wife, and determined to prevent Earl from making the mistake of taking on more than he could handle.

When she arrived at her own home, Earl was in his room.

"Where have you been?" she asked petulantly.

"Oh, here and there."

"I thought you were involved in that fight in Stockholm."

He shook his head.

She stood in the doorway and watched him leaning over his desk, attempting to write something on a sheet of paper. She was proud of his profile, tow-headed as a boy, handsome in a masculine way. He cracked his knuckles nervously.

"What did you do?" she asked.

Suddenly he flung the pencil down, jumped from his chair and paced the floor. "I talked to an Agent last night," he said.

"Where?"

"Bangkok."

Mrs. Jamieson had to sit down. Finally she was able to ask, "How did it happen?"

"I broke into the office there to get at the records. He caught me."

"What were you looking for?"

"I wanted to learn the names of the men who killed Father." He said the word strangely. He was unaccustomed to it.

"Did you find them?"

He pointed to the paper on his desk. Mrs. Jamieson, trembling, picked it up and read the names. Seeing them there, written like any other names would be written, made her furious. How could they? How could the names of murderers look like ordinary names? When she thought them in her mind, they even sounded like ordinary names —and they shouldn't! She had always thought that those names, if she ever saw them, would be filthy, unholy scratches on paper, evil sounds, like the rustle of bedclothes to a jealous lover listening at a keyhole. "Tom Palieu" didn't sound evil; neither did "Al Jonson." She was shaken by this more than she would permit Earl to see.

"WHY did you want the names?"

"I don't know," he said. "Curiosity, maybe, or a subconscious desire for revenge. I just wanted to see them."

"Tell me what happened! If an Agent saw you . . . well, either he killed you or you killed him. But you're here alive."

"I didn't kill him. That's what seems so strange. And he didn't try to kill me. We didn't even fight. He

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didn't ask why I broke in without breaking the lock or even a window. He seemed to know. He did ask what I was doing there, and who I was. I told him, and . . . he helped me get the names. He asked where I lived. 'None of your damn business,' I told him. Then he said he didn't blame me for not telling, that Konvs must fear Agents, and hate them. Then he said, 'Do you know why we kill Konvs? We kill them because there is no prison cell in the world that will hold a Konv. When they break the law, we have no choice. It is a terrible thing, but must be done. We don't want your secret; we only want law and order. There is room enough in the world for both of us.' "

Mrs. Jamieson was furious. "And you believed him?"

"I don't know. I just know what he said — and that he let me go without trying to shoot me."

Mrs. Jamieson stopped on her way out of the room and laid a hand on his arm. "Your father would have been proud of you," she said. "Soon you will learn the truth about the Agents."

Beyond the closed door, out of sight of her son, Mrs. Jamieson gave rein to the excitement that ran through her. He had wanted the names! He didn't know why — not yet — but he would. "He'll do it yet!" she whispered to the flowered wallpaper. She didn't care that no one heard her.

She didn't know where the men were now, those who had killed her husband. They could be anywhere. Agents moved from post to post; in ten years they might be scattered all over Earth. In the killing of Konvs, some cylinders might even be taken by Agents — and used by them, for the power and freedom the cylinders gave must be coveted even by them. And they were in the best position to gain them. She was consumed by fear that one or more of the men on Earl's list might have acquired a cylinder and were now Konvs themselves.

TWO weeks later she read a news item saying that Tom Palieu had been killed by a Konv. The assassin's identity was unknown, but agents were working on the case.

She knew. She had found a gun in Earl's desk.

She took the paper into Earl's room. "Did you do this?"

He turned away from her. "It doesn't matter whether I did or not. They will suspect me. His name was on the list."

"They will," she agreed. "It doesn't matter who the Konv is, now that an Agent has been killed. The one in Bangkok will tell them about you and the list of names, and it's all they need."

"Well, what else can he do?" Earl asked. "After all, he is an

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Agent. If one of them is killed, he will have to tell what he knows."

"You're defending him? Why?" she cried. "Tell me why!"

He removed her hand from his arm. Her nails were digging into his flesh. "I don't know why. Mother, I'm sorry, but Agents are just people to me. I can't hate them the way you do."

Mrs. Jamieson's face colored, then drained white.

Suddenly, with a wide, furious sweep of her hand, she slapped his face. So much strength and rage was in her arm that the blow almost sent him spinning. They faced each other, she breathing hard from the exertion, Earl stunned immobile — not by the blow, but from the knowledge that she could hate so suddenly, viciously.

She controlled herself. "We must find a way to leave here," she said, calmly.

"They won't find us."

"Oh, yes they will," she said. "Don't underestimate them. Agents are picked from the most intelligent people on Earth. It will be a small job for them. Don't forget they know who you are. Even if you hadn't been so stupid as to tell them, they'd know. They knew my pattern from the time your father was alive. They got yours when we were together years ago, teasing them. They linked your pattern with mine. They know that your father and I had a son. Your birth was recorded. The only difficult aspect of their job now is to find where you live, and it won't be impossible. They will drive their cars through every city on Earth with those new detectors, until they pick up your pattern or mine. I'm afraid it's time to leave Earth."

EARL sat down suddenly, "It's just as well. I thought maybe some day I might hate them too, or learn to like them. But I can do neither, so I am halfway between, and no man can live this way."

She did not answer him. Finally he said, "It doesn't make sense to you, does it?"

"No, it doesn't. This is not the time for such discussions, anyway. The Agents have their machines working at top speed, while we sit here and talk."

Suddenly they were not alone.

No sound was generated by the man's coming. One instant they were talking alone, the next he was here. Earl saw him first. He was a middle-aged man whose hair was completely white. He stood near the desk, easily, as if standing there were the most natural way to relax. He was entirely nude . . . but it seemed natural and right.

Then Mrs. Jamieson saw him.

"Benjamin!" she cried. "I knew someone would come."

He smiled. "This is your son?"

"Yes," she said. "We are ready."

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"I remember when you were born," he said, and smiled in reminiscence. "Your father was afraid you would be twins."

Earl said, "Why was my father killed?"

"By mistake. Back in those days, like now, there were good Konvs and bad. One of those not selected by Stinson to join us was enraged, half crazy with envy. He killed two women there in Bangkok. The Agents thought Jamieson—I mean, *your father — did it.* Jamieson was the greatest man among us. It was he who first conceived the theory that there was a basic, underlying law in the operation of the cylinders. Even now, no one knows how the idea of love ties in with the Stinson Effect; but we do know that hate and greed as motivating forces can greatly minimize the cylinders' power. That is why the undesirables with cylinders have never reached Centaurus."

Heavy steps sounded on the porch outside.

"We'd better hurry," Mrs. Jamieson said.

Benjamin held out his hands. They took them, to increase the power of the cylinders. As the Agents pounded on the door, Mrs. Jamieson flicked one thought of hatred at them, but of course they did not hear her. Benjamin's hands gripped tightly.

Mrs. Jamieson slowly opened her eyes...

She no longer felt the hands. *She was still in the room!* Benjamin and her son were gone. Her outstretched hands touched nothing.

Her power was gone!

The Agents stepped into the room over the broken door. She stared at them, then ran to Earl's desk, fumbling for the gun.

The Agents' guns rattled.

Love, Benjamin said, the greatest of these is love. Or did someone else say that? Someone, somewhere, perhaps in another time, in some misty, forgotten chip of time long gone, in another frame of reference perhaps...

Mrs. Jamieson could not remember, before she died.

— BILL DOEDE

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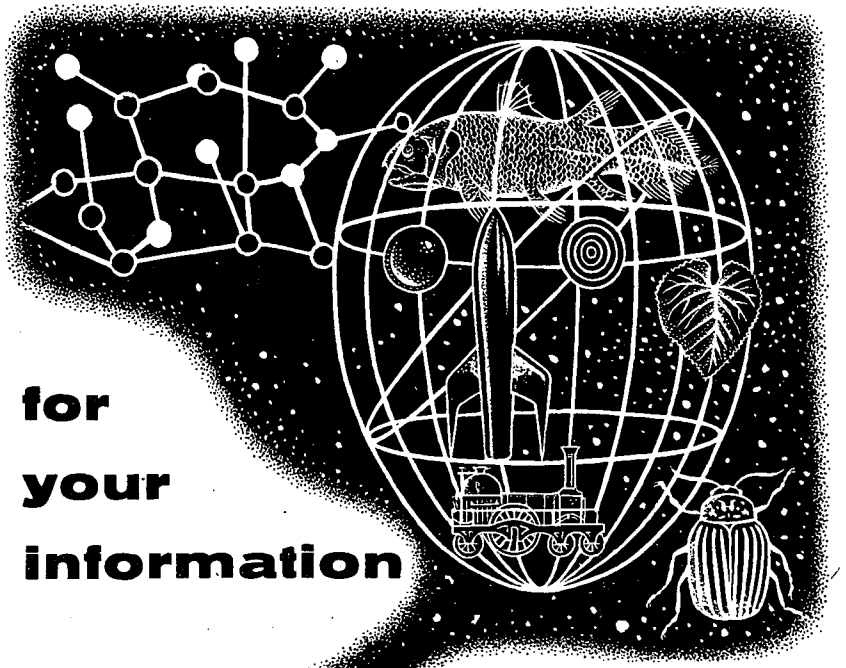

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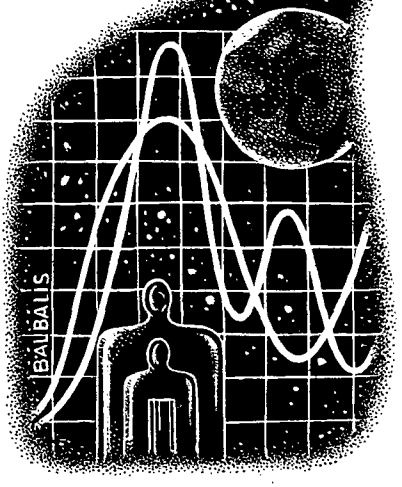

THE MOON WORM

THE theme of this column has been suggested to me by the most unusual introduction I have received so far. The place was a small town in Tennessee, the occasion a dinner party preceding a lecture.

One gentleman, upon learning my name, took me to meet his wife and introduced me as "the man who doesn't believe anything." While both his wife and

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I looked surprised, he continued: "He doesn't think that there are any cosmic secrets in the Great Pyramid; he doesn't believe that Atlantis ever existed; he doesn't think that the Dalai Lama could have killed off the whole invading Chinese communist army with a single magical gesture if he had wanted to use his powers. He also doesn't think that the flying saucers are spaceships watching us. In short, he doesn't think that there are any mysteries!"

All this was stated with a fair amount of belligerence. Next day, looking out across the overcast from an airplane window, I suddenly had the impression that this belligerence had been directed at the lady. But that was an afterthought (and possibly a wrong one); at the moment I had just replied politely that my disagreement with the stories about the Great Pyramid and Atlantis was due to the fact that I believe I know how they came to be written. I added that I am positive I had never said anything about the Dalai Lama and his alleged magical powers. There I had simply had to trust the news services, which reported that he did flee from the invaders and took something as prosaic as money with him.

As for mysteries which are still left, I don't have to "think," as the gentleman phrased it. I know there are a number of them and they are good ones. They are fully documented, but at the same time they are as inexplicable as if they were the merest hearsay.

Here is a sampling.

"WHEN," THE Samoans told the English traveler Powell, "this shrub is covered with blossoms [Powell knew that the blossoms, which he had seen before, would be bright scarlet and that the shrub bore the scientific name of *Erythrina indica*] it is time to see whether the boats and the baskets are ready. Then, when the *Sisi* plant [related to the myrtle] blooms, we look for the Moon. Soon after, the Moon will be just above the horizon toward evening (west) at dawn. Ten days later we will have *Mblalolo levu* and a month after that *Mblalolo lailai*. You'll see."

Powell noted that the islander's face was beaming in anticipation when saying *Mblalolo lailai*. It was a big event for the Samoans as well as for the Fiji Islanders, these two feasts coming a month apart. The term "feast" is to be taken in its primitive meaning, an occasion where everybody present eats until nothing can possibly be stuffed inside any more.

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Fig. 1: Palolo morning off Samoa, about 1890
(From *Kosmos*, 1926, original artist unknown)

It must be remembered here that these islands are in the southern hemisphere; though the two months in question are October and November, this was a spring festival. It might also be useful to state that the word *levu* means "little" or "minor" and the word *lailai* means "large" or "major." The word *Mblalolo,* finally, was adapted by somebody, possibly by Powell, for Western tongues by changing it to *palolo.*

During the night of the *Mblalolo* the Samoans did not go to sleep. Late, after midnight, they rowed out, but not very far. While the men handled the oars, the women had loosely woven baskets ready. Other women and boys who did not yet have adult status sat at the shore with their baskets. All of a sudden, at four A. M., the sea became alive. Wormlike shapes wiggled at the surface, as suddenly as if they had been ejected by a submerged explosion. Within less than ten minutes the surface was solidly covered with worm bodies, wiggling, squirming, in steady motion.

The girls scooped them into the boats with their baskets and everybody aboard — and ashore — started to eat. The worms were so thick that one did not even need a basket; just reaching into the water with bare hands

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would bring edible results.

But only for an hour or so.

At the end of that time the ocean would look cloudy, as if milk had been poured into it, but no more worms. The boats returned to shore with their catch; the gourmets preferred their worms baked in palm leaves. And countless runners were waiting ashore too, to carry baskets to those living farther inland. On Samoa, as reported by a later investigator, the islanders had organized relays of runners to get the delicacy inland just as fast as well-exercised legs could do it.

These were the cultural aspects, the two feast days, or rather nights in spring, based on the sudden appearance of an edible marine creature.

The zoological aspects were not quite as simple.

THAT the things which came to the surface in uncountable multitudes were worms was beyond any doubt. In fact they were annelid worms, of the same general type as our earthworm, but a large marine version. They came in two colors. One was darkish green or bluish green; these were filled with eggs, literally to the bursting point, for that's the way they disappeared an hour or so later, by bursting. The other kind was whitish or yellowish or about the color of egg yolk. These contained the male sperm.

As for the length of the worms, the reports were at first a bit confusing; any length between one inch and fourteen inches was reported. But it was soon realized that the shorter ones were literally pieces, segments broken off the bigger ones.

So far things were nice and clear; the two Mblalolo nights were the mating periods of these worms. As the Samoans had said all along, the two mating nights were one month apart, but they did not fall on the same dates in successive years. Outside of these two mating nights, nobody had ever seen a Mblalolo. It obviously lived at the bottom of the sea normally.

The worm was first given a scientific name, *Palolo viridis,* the second word with reference to the green color of the egg-containing segments. A little later the scientific name was changed to *Eunice viridis.* It was quite clear from the outset that the sexes were very strictly separated, each worm being either male or female. But the early observers reported with head-shaking that all the worms were headless.

Samoa, at the time I am talking about (ca. 1890), was still an independent kingdom with three

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countries yielding a good deal of influence: the United States (which had leased the harbor of Pago Pago—pronounced Pango Pango—), Great Britain and Germany. In 1898 trouble developed which led to the withdrawal of Great Britain and a partition of the Samoan islands between the United States and Germany.

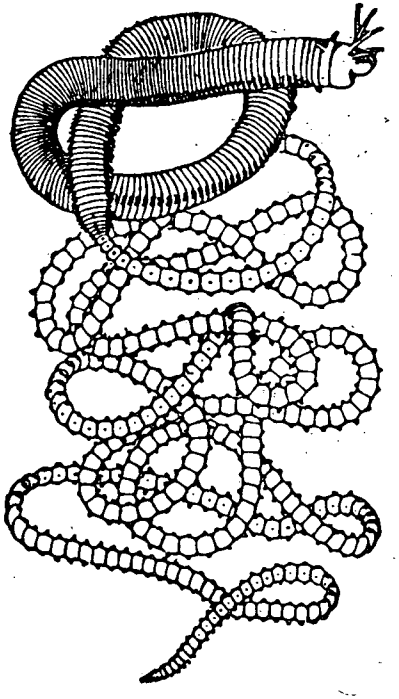

Fig. 2: *Eunice viridis*, alias Palolo. Complete specimen; the spawning break occurs where segments become roundish

But before this political development took place a German zoologist, Dr. Benedikt Friedländer, had arrived on the scene. His first attempt had been to find the palolo in its natural habitat and under pre-swarming conditions. He fished for it a fair distance from the shore and at considerable depth. Of course he caught some marine worms but none of them was *Palolo viridis*. While thinking about the equipment he would need to fish at even greater depths (and, logically, still farther from shore) he talked to Samoans.

Somewhat puzzled, he told after his return to Berlin that the information coming from "an old woman" had been best — presumably he expected that young and actively fishing men should know most about it. The old woman told Dr. Friedländer that the worms lived in cracks of the coral rock, not very deep and close to the shore. Benedikt Friedländer, willing to try everything once — he even tried the green palolo segments when they swarmed, reporting that they tasted like almost unsalted Russian caviar — had a number of blocks of dead coral hauled up. Yes, there was *Palolo viridis*, complete with head and up to about 40 inches long.

The old woman had also told him that the worms in the coral

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rock, if placed in pails of sea water, would swarm at the same time as the worms in the open. Friedländer was too busy to make the experiment but did not doubt the statement; he just stated honestly that he had not verified it.

ONCE you had the complete worm (Fig. 2) many of the puzzles became quite clear. The worm as a whole does not swarm. The head and about the first fifth of its length stays quietly where it always lives. The latter part of the body, the portion containing the eggs or the sperm, is detached at the right moment, rises squirming to the surface and, after a while, bursts, thus uniting eggs and sperm. One segment of the worm population does this in October; this is the smaller group. The larger group (suspected to be the older worms) does it in November. Friedländer watched the *Mblalolo lailai* of November 16, 1897.

Well, all this is admittedly somewhat weird, but the facts are established. What is the "mystery"?

The mystery is the timing.

The Samoans, as has been mentioned, looked for the Moon after the *Sisi* plant bloomed. Friedländer found that the first swarming occurred when the Moon was in its last quarter, after the first full moon in October. The second (and bigger) swarming took place when the Moon was in its last quarter after full moon in November. Now these figures must *not* be understood as being approximations. The palolo does not swarm "about a week after full moon," but at the moment the Moon is in its last quarter, with a leeway to be measured in hours only.

Nobody has been able to figure out why.

It can't be the light of the Moon. To begin with, the moonlight is obviously much stronger when the Moon is full, but nothing happens then. Moreover, the *Mblalolo lailai* watched by Friedländer happened to be a night with heavy cloud cover, and during the second part of that night rain poured unceasingly. It can't be the tidal influence. Again, that would be more pronounced at full moon. The great Swedish scientist Svante Arhhenius thought that it might have something to do with atmospheric electricity — the Samoans had said that sometimes there had been thunderstorms during those nights. But more often there had been no thunderstorms.

There is no use wasting space on the problem. We simply do not know.

But since Friedländer's day

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we have found something else: a related worm with the same behavior, this time in the northern hemisphere and in the Atlantic. It is *Eunice fucata* of the island Loggerhead Key in the West Indies. It also swarms when the Moon is in its last quarter, but here it is the last quarter following the full moon in July.

Because the numbers are smaller, it is not as spectacular as around Samoa and the Fiji Islands. But the performance is the same and the mystery of the timing is the same.

SLOW LIGHTNING

JUST AS dictionaries and encyclopedias are in need of constant revision, our popular sayings should be amended too from time to time. The man who says "Everything that goes up must come down" should be obliged to add "unless it reaches escape velocity." Likewise the man who says "with the speed of lightning" should make the provision "but I don't mean ball lightning."

Ball lightning may move as slowly as three inches per second. It may even stand still for a short time. Ball lightning is one of the things I have yet to see myself. I also have never seen a volcanic eruption, but this problem (if it prayed on my mind) could be easily solved by flying to the scene of an erupting volcano. Ball lightning is, as far as we know, pure chance. But I do know that my chance would be somewhat better in Europe north of the Alps.

So many Americans have never even heard of ball lightning because it happens to be very rare in North America. That a natural phenomenon should be rare in one area and not rare in another seems somewhat incredible at first glance. But it is a fact, for example, that "twisters" are rare in northern Europe (and if they do occur they are quite weak compared to their American counterpart) and ball lightning, while by no means a frequent phenomenon in Europe, seems to be positively abundant compared to its rarity in the United States.

Instead of describing ball lightning and how it behaves, let me give a condensed quotation of a case which took place in Paris just after noon on July 5, 1852, and for which sworn statements were filed with the French Academy of Science.

It was during the summer and for this reason the fireplace in the apartment was not in use. According to custom the front opening of the fireplace had been closed by a wooden frame to

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which stout wrapping paper had been pasted. Likewise the curved stove pipe on top of the fireplace had been taken down and the round hole in the wall into which the stovepipe fitted had also been pasted over with wrapping paper.

The apartment in the Rue St. Jacques, next to the Val-de-Grâce Church, was located on the fourth floor and occupied by a tailor. He had finished lunch but remained seated at the table because there was a thunderstorm going on. Some time (not immediately) after a very strong thunderclap, the frame closing the fireplace was pushed out as if by a strong gust of wind. Then a fiery ball, the size of a human head, emerged from the opening and meandered slowly about the room, a few inches above the floor. The ball was brightly luminous but did not radiate any heat.

It approached the tailor's feet ("like a cat," he said later) but the man did not wish to be touched. He pulled his feet back without rising from the chair and watched the ball which slowly moved around in the center of the room. Then it suddenly rose to about one yard above the floor. It became slightly elongated and flew to the hole in the wall. The paper was peeled off without being damaged in the process and the ball disappeared in the chimney. After it had climbed to the top of the chimney — very slowly — it exploded with a loud noise, destroying the top portion of the chimney.

TO SOMEBODY who reads such a description for the first time, all this sounds pretty far-fetched. But to anyone who is conversant with the behavior of ball lightning this is merely typical, as can easily be seen from another case, this time from Königsberg, East Prussia.

The owner of a beer garden outside the city, a Herr Babinski, rendered the following description: "We had a strong thunderstorm during the early afternoon hours and my beer garden was hit by lightning which, however, did not cause any damage. Immediately afterward there appeared, at about my eye level, a reddish rotating ball approximately 16 inches in diameter, in the open door of the restaurant kitchen. Since the other door of the kitchen was open too there was a considerable draft. The sphere, rotating all the time, passed quite a number of people, climbed up along the wiring of the electric bell, was then apparently caught by the draft, then moved along another electric wire to the stable and ex-

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ploded with a loud noise above the door of the stable."

That ball lightning likes to travel along a conductor is almost proverbial. One was seen on May 19, 1925, in the Dutch city of The Hague. It moved for a very considerable distance along a streetcar rail, then jumped into a transformer box and disappeared.

A real estate owner in East Prussia, Reich by name, had the interesting experience of being pursued by ball lightning. In the evening of "the Day of Pentecost, 1890, at 8 P.M." Herr Reich drove his carriage along a country road lined on both sides by wire fences. His carriage was of the open type, with four rather large iron-rimmed wooden wheels, running on iron axles and normally drawn by two, but since this was in horse-breeding East Prussia, more likely by four horses.

"The sky was covered with clouds, but it was not raining. Two very bright head-sized balls appeared on both wire fences, moving along the fences at the same rate as the carriage. Many sparks jumped from these balls to the carriage axles. The horses shied and increased their pace but the faster the carriage moved the faster the fire balls moved until we came to the end of the wire fences. There both balls, collapsed into nothing, without an explosion but with a noise like crumbling a sheet of paper."

Finally a case which happened near the small town of Bischofswerda in Saxony on April 29, 1925, at half an hour after noon. It was one of the rare cases of a violent lightning ball which was described by many witnesses.

Taking it chronologically, the first witness was a mailman by the name of Fasold who asserted that he had not known about ball lightning. He was on the road and saw "a grayish-black cloud from which something dangled which almost looked like a trouser leg. Suddenly something fell from this dangling trouser leg which looked like a golden beer barrel. This body landed near a telephone pole with a loud crash and I had the impression that it came apart, somewhat like emptying a basket of potatoes. From this heap real lightning jumped and one of the strokes hit the school. I was so surprised that I can't say whether the crash was followed by real thunder or not, but I know that it was raining a bit before and that a little hail fell afterward." Mailman Fasold also stated that the trees looked for a short time like Christmas trees, as if they had candles at the tips of the twigs.

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AT THE school they saw a lightning ball move along the telephone wire (later it turned out that it had first smashed a transformer box) traveling at about the rate of a briskly walking man. The ball moved into the apartment of the teacher (which was part of the school building). The teacher (male) was using the telephone and stated that the lightning ball threw him to the floor. The telephone itself was not damaged. The door to the teacher's apartment had a glass pane; later it was found to have two holes both perfectly circular and clean. One of these two holes was the size of a silver dollar, the other that of a quarter (the German report mentions other coins, of course, but of the size of the American coins named), and it is thought that the bigger hole was that caused by the entry while the smaller one was caused on leaving, when the ball had expended some of its energy. Like other lightning balls, it moved along wires, but this one melted the wires into tiny spherules of metal. But it did not ignite inflammable material in its direct path — also a common feature of all the reports, lightning balls have been known to melt down quarter-inch bronze rods, but nestle in excelsior without igniting it — and then proceeded along a ceiling. It must have moved under the plaster, because the plaster was forced off. Then it broke through a wall and disappeared.

Afterward additional damage was found, presumably caused before the lightning ball entered the school building. The telephone wire had been melted down for 700 feet of its length, several telephone poles, including a fifteen-foot support of angle iron, were splintered, a cable 2½ feet below ground was severed as if with a stroke with a sharp axe, the trunk of a cherry tree was split and several men working near the road were thrown to the ground without harming them otherwise. And all this, as far as the witnesses could recall, without making any noise at all!

The overall picture is that a rather large amount of electrical energy is concentrated in one spot, that the lightning ball prefers to follow electrical conductors which it may or may not melt in the process, that it does not set fires and does not electrocute people. Several people have been touched by lightning balls, much against their will and inclination, in most cases without experiencing any sensation. Some people were thrown to the ground, but without other harm than that caused by the

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fall itself. Most of the time the end of the ball is by way of an explosion which is described as sounding like the sharp crack of an enormous whip. But the damage caused by the explosion is minor. Often the balls just go out. In most cases the witnesses cannot tell where the ball came from. In a few cases it has been seen to fall from a cloud, but very slowly, as if its weight were negligible. In a few other cases witnesses think that it followed the path of a normal lightning stroke which preceded it.

Sometimes lightning balls have appeared without an accompanying thunderstorm. Most of them, however, were associated with thunderstorms, though it is almost a rule that they appear at the end of the storm — the end for the area in question, that is.

Now, how do they originate?

Well, that's the mystery in this case.

A Norwegian engineer by the name of A. Nielson once obtained an artificial lightning ball by accident when short-circuiting a 12,000-volt generator. This ball rose in the air and then disappeared (dissipated?) — it may not have been a real lightning ball but just a cloud of superheated air and metal vapor which happened to take on a spherical shape.

BACK in 1954, the well-known Soviet atomic scientist P. L. Kapitsa busied himself with a theoretical study of ball lightning. His reasoning is very interesting, though I have a feeling that it is not the answer. Academician Kapitsa pointed out that the cloud resulting from an atomic explosion lasts a very short time in spite of its enormous size. Such an explosion cloud consists of gases which Kapitsa assumes to be 100 per cent ionized. Ball lightning, which must consist at least partly of ionized gases, is known to last for a minute and longer, and its size, compared to that of an atomic explosion cloud, is virtually microscopic. Hence, Kapitsa reasoned, the lightning ball must have a steady "energy income" during its lifetime. When this "energy income" is cut off, the ball shrivels into nothing; it just goes out. If the supply is cut off very suddenly the ball collapses, its collapse causing a shock wave which makes the sharp crack. The noise, then, would be that of an implosion rather than that of an explosion. (The nature of the sound is no clue as to which it is, unfortunately. Either an explosion or an implosion can cause such a sharp crack.)

Kapitsa's guess as to what feeds the lightning ball for the

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duration of its existence is natural radio waves, presumably generated by the storm cloud and reflected by the ground. A very interesting idea, but this is really explaining one unknown by another one. It seems logical that a thundercloud might generate radio waves, but we don't know to what extent. Kapitsa is too much of a scientist to insist that his idea is right just because it is his idea. His paper begins with the sentence: "The nature of ball lightning is not as yet understood."

But while I don't think that Kapitsa's reasoning, novel as it is, has solved the problem of the origin of ball lightning, he quoted a case reported in *Nature* (No. 563, April 1952) where a lightning ball entered the interior of an airplane flying at an altitude of 9,200 feet. This is the first recorded instance of high-altitude ball lightning that has come to my attention. But I have always suspected that high-altitude ball lightning exists.

Naturally I have not quoted all the cases on record — they would fill a book. In fact, they *do* fill a book; it was written by Dr. Walther Brand in 1923 and published during the same year in Hamburg by the publisher Henri Grand. (Its title is *Der Kugelblitz.*) In reading through this book soon after it was published, I was impressed by the fact that only a small number were reported from flat land areas near sea level. Ball lightning seemed to occur much more frequently in mountainous areas, at least a thousand feet above sea level. I may add here that the only two eyewitness accounts I got in the United States conformed to this pattern: one came from a mountainous area in the East and the other from Denver.

Assuming that ball lightning was more likely in a somewhat rarefied air, I wondered whether it might not occur fairly high up — say 10,000 feet — in free air. When, near the end of the Second World War, we got those reports about the so-called "foo fighters" — balls of light following our airplanes near their wingtips for long distance without ever doing anything — I immediately thought of the two lightning balls which had accompanied the open carriage on the country road.

Taking the same risk which Kapitsa took, namely of calling on one unknown to explain another one, I have held for a long time that the answer to many "flying saucers" is ball lightning in mid-air. Since we don't know how ball lightning forms, one might even speculate whether the presence of the airplane is

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not one of the factors which causes it to form.

But at least we do know that ball lightning exists.

What we still have to learn is how it comes into existence.

PINWHEELS UNDER WATER

IN THE CASE of the palolo, we know everything except the reason behind the timing, or, better, the mechanism of the timing. In the case of ball lightning, we know that the phenomenon is electrical and we have a number of case histories, but do not know reasons or conditions for its occurrence.

Our next mystery is one where we just know that it exists. It has been well described just once, in the January 1952 issue of the *United States Naval Institute Proceedings,* by Commander J. R. Bodler USNR.

Like a good seaman, Commander Bodler supplied all the detail: "Date, 14 November 1949, Time 1830 GMT, Position 26° 17.5′ N., 56° 51′ E. Wind NW'ly force 1. Sea calm with slight surface ripples; no swell. Air 75° F., sea 83° F. Visibility: very good. A clear bright night with no moon. Course 157° T., speed through the water 11.6 knots, actual speed over the bottom approx. 9 knots due to strong head current. At no time were any unusual deviations of the magnetic compass observed."

In landman's language this means that the vessel, bound for India, had come from some port on the Persian Gulf and was about to enter the Gulf of Oman. At that time the third mate called the skipper to the bridge. "About four points on the port bow, toward the coast of Iran, there was a luminous band which seemed to pulsate." At first Commander Bodler thought that it was near the horizon; then it turned out that it was below the horizon, in the water. The luminous patch, which clearly pulsated, happened to be on course of the vessel so that the two drew together.

"At a distance of about a mile from the ship," to quote Commander Bodler, "it was apparent that the disturbance was roughly circular in shape, about 1000 to 1500 feet in diameter. The pulsations could now be seen to be caused by a revolving motion of the entire pattern about a rather ill-defined center; with streaks of light like the beams of searchlights, radiating outward from the center and revolving (in a counterclockwise direction) like the spokes of a gigantic wheel."

A sketch drawn by Commander Bodler shows that the

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outer ends of the "spokes" lagged behind, as if whatever made up the spokes of the wheels moved with a nearly uniform speed, so that the extreme ends naturally lagged.

"For several minutes the vessel occupied the approximate center of the phenomenon. Slightly curved bands of light crossed the bow, passed rapidly down the port side from bow to stern, and up the starboard side from aft, forward. The bands of luminance seemed to pass a given point at about half-second intervals. . . . The central 'hub' of the phenomenon drew gradually

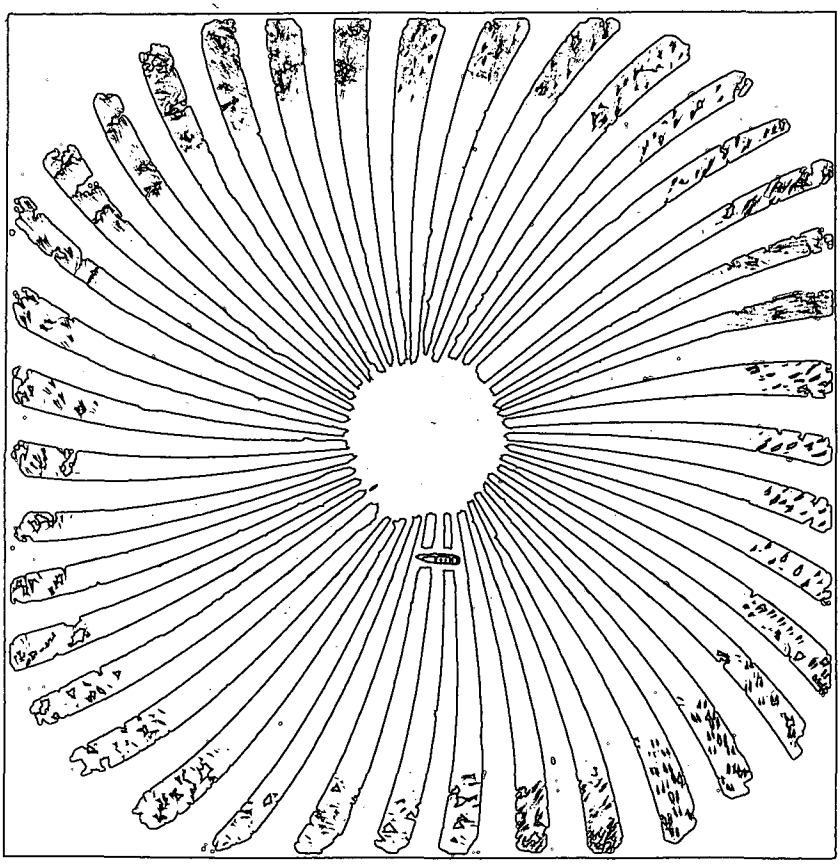

Fig. 3: How Commander Bodler's phenomenon might have looked from an airplane

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to starboard and passed aft; becoming more and more distant on the starboard quarter. While it was still in sight, several miles astern and appearing, by this time, as a pulsating band of light, a repetition of the same manifestation appeared fine on the starboard bow. This was slightly smaller in area than the first, and a trifle less brilliant.

"Approximately half an hour later, a third repetition of this manifestation was observed. The general characteristics, direction of rotation, etc., were the same as the others, but this one was much smaller and less brilliant. Its diameter was not over 800 to 1000 feet and compared to the other two was unimpressive."

I CANNOT recall having read another report just like this. Some fifty years ago somebody whose name I don't remember wrote a description of an especially impressive example of phosphorescence he had witnessed from board of a passenger liner bound from the Mediterranean for Yokohama. He wrote that sometimes it looked as if the ship were the center of a gigantic fireworks pinwheel — but such a comparison can well be made, as everybody knows who has seen it, without experiencing the phenomenon described by Commander Bodler.

No, I don't know the explanation, but the discussion of the palolo phenomenon made me think of another marine worm, the fire worms of Bermuda. Like the palolo, they come to the surface to spawn a few days after the full moon, but not with such precise timing, and several months in a row in midsummer and early fall. The females come to the surface first and circle around, emitting flashes of greenish light. This attracts the males, which dart after them, also emitting flashes of light. Then they mate and burst open like the palolo — but the fire worms die because they take their heads along when swarming.

It has been suggested that the much discussed light which Columbus saw during the night before landfall was not a native's torch on the water, but fire worms in the water. It is, of course, possible that Commander Bodler's observation has a similar explanation. But at the moment this is just conjecture. We know of no marine organisms whatsoever which swarm in such a pattern.

— WILLY LEY

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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ONE MORE city. The pattern went on. One more city to search for a man I did not know, whose face I would not recognize. I had no copy of either his fingerprints or encephalograph, or any other clue to his identity.

Yet he had to be found.

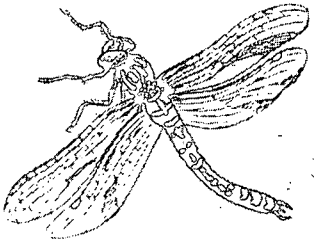
At one time he had been my best friend. His name was Howard Zealley then. He wouldn't be using the same name now.

And the "bug" in his brain would by this time have made him a stranger.

There was only one way the job could be done: I had to make contact — even though I might not be aware of it at the time — reveal who I was, and hope he'd come out after me.

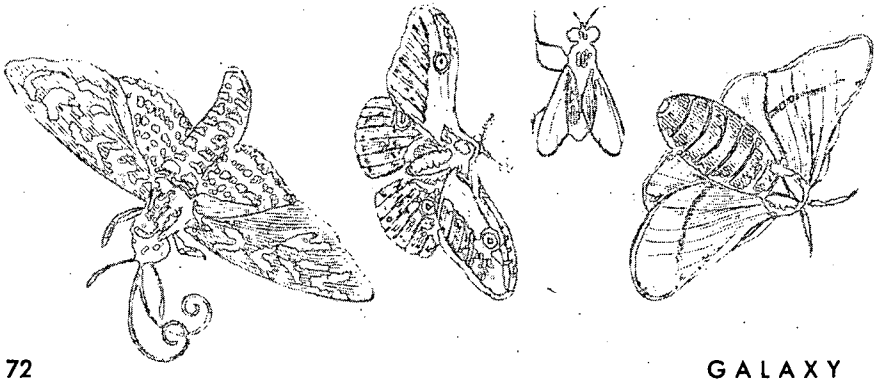
I rented a room in a cheap hotel. But not so cheap that it wouldn't have a grid connection with information service.

I wrote my name big on the register: **MAX CALOF.** There was always the chance that he



The man I searched for could be anybody at all. If I didn't find him, there'd be nobody at all.

METAMO



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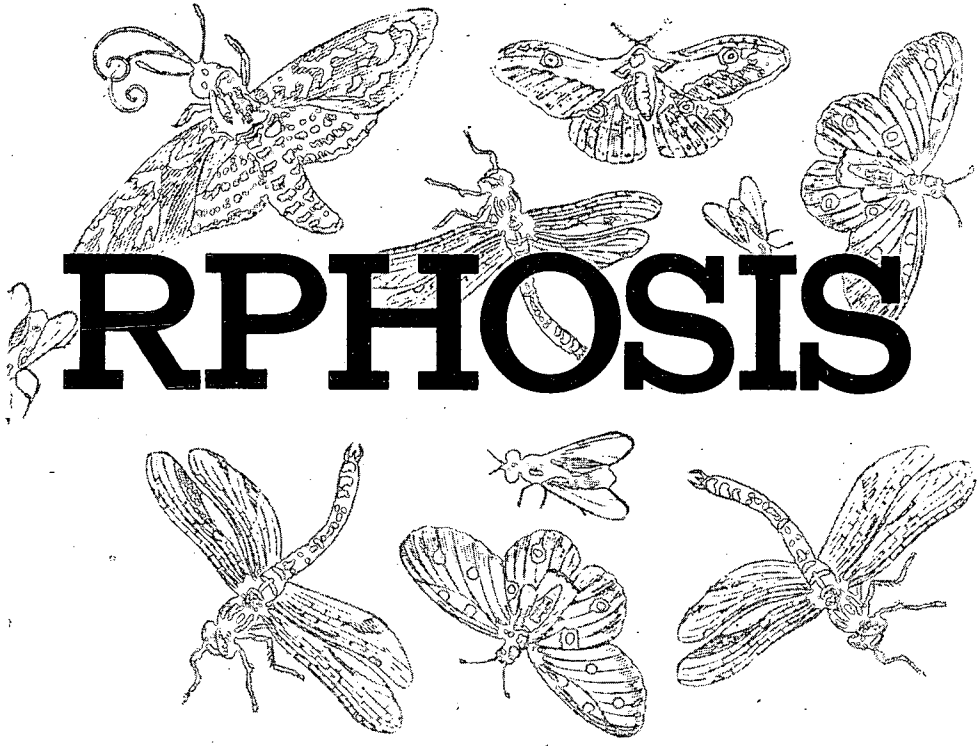
would see it. He would remember the name.

The room was small, a standard "living-in" cubicle. Which was all right. I didn't intend to sleep here. I hadn't slept in nine years now — a year before the chase began. I kicked off my saddle shoes and walked on stockinged feet to the vid coin slot and dropped in a half dollar.

The screen flickered once and the face of a beautiful, smiling woman came into focus. "May I help you, sir?" she asked in a pleasant, very friendly voice.

I realized that the woman was not actually speaking, as she appeared to be doing. She was merely a woman image, with her voice and facial expressions synchronized in some way with the word impulses coming from information central.

I STRETCHED out on the bed, folding the pillow under my head to have an unobstructed view of the screen. "Give me the names of the city's two hundred



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most prominent male citizens," I said.

There was no sign of surprise on the woman face, but I got the usual expressive long pause from central. The request was unusual. Central relays always had trouble with the proper definition of "prominent."

"Any particular category?" the woman image finally asked.

"All categories," I answered.

Another pause. Even a mechanical brain would take a bit of time to assemble that information, but get it I would.

After a while the woman began. "Edward Anderson. Russell Baker. Joseph Dillon. Francis . . . ." As her gently modulated voice went on, I closed my eyes, keeping my mind blank, letting each name pass without resistance through my consciousness. Sometimes a hunch came that way. There was no need to make a written list. I had total recall.

I became aware that I had opened my shirt collar and that I was perspiring. I hadn't noticed how hot the day was or that the room had no air conditioning. I took a minute to concentrate. The perspiration dried and my body adjusted itself to the room's temperature and humidity. When I was comfortable again, I returned my attention to the woman voice.

At the end of the reading, no name had stayed with me. I opened my eyes. "Eliminate all except those within the age range of twenty to forty," I said. Zealley would be thirty-seven by now — but probably appear younger. "Got that?"

"Yes sir."

"How many left?" I asked.

"Sixty-four."

It was always a temptation to cut the list further. I was weary of the seemingly endless repetition of the same routine and the frustrating lack of any results. Eight years is a long time to search for a man. Yet I could not afford to be careless. I was gambling everything on my having figured out the way Zealley's mind operated, how he would act, where he would hide. When the woman finished speaking, I walked to the vid and switched it off.

I noted by the wall clock that it was almost noon. I hadn't had breakfast yet. In the back of my mind, as I ordered a meal, was the certainty that someday this appetite too would grow sated and dull. There were so few satisfactions left . . .

THE FIRST name on my list was Edward Anderson. The city's mayor. It took me two hours to get into his office, and two minutes to be on my way out again. I had asked my ques-

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tions and met the usual blank response.

On the street I spent another hour strolling through the shopping district. No shadower picked me up.

Which pretty well eliminated Anderson — or anyone in close contact with him.

Second name, Russell Baker. Industrialist. Minneapolis Mining & Allied Products.

I got as far as his secretary, John Roesler.

"What can I do for you?" Roesler asked. He was a big-boned, handsome man, with an air of sleepy indolence. He cleaned and trimmed his fingernails with a small gold penknife.

"I'd like to see Mr. Baker," I said.

"What about?"

"Confidential business."

"No one gets in to see a man like Mr. Baker that easy. If they could, he'd be pestered by every crackpot in town."

This was as far as I was going to get. I had to make the best of it. "Will you give him a message then?" I asked.

Roesler shrugged. "If I think he should have it."

"I would advise you to deliver it," I said making my tone as impressive as possible. "If he doesn't get it, you may be out of a job."

His eyebrows raised slightly.

"Tell him," I said, "that Max Calof wants to see him," and spelled my last name for him.

"And what should I say you want to see him about?" I had caught a slight break in Roesler's composure.

"About a mutual friend — Howard Zealley," I replied. "I think he'll be interested."

Roesler hid a yawn behind a well-manicured hand. "We'll see," he said, and I went back out.

Twice within ten minutes I observed the same pale-faced youth trailing me, and my pulse gave a great racing bound. This could be it.

I stopped and studied the men's hats in a shop window. From the side of my eye I saw the youth stop also. He leaned against a traffic light stanchion and kicked idly at a scrap of paper on the sidewalk.

I wandered through a department store, stopping to purchase a toothbrush and a handkerchief, and he followed, keeping always a discreet distance behind. My last doubt was removed. I returned to my hotel. With luck, the hunter would now become the hunted.

In my room I pulled a grip from under the bed and took out a rubber-handled screwdriver and a pair of pliers, a pocket knife, several lengths of copper wire, and a small instrument in

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a black case about the size of my fist. Climbing on a straight-back chair, I removed the frosted globe from the room's center light. I bared the wires, carefully spliced on two pieces of wire, connected the black box, and replaced the globe.

I had a little more trouble with the electrical clock's wiring, but at the end I was satisfied. The time was two-fifteen. I made my setting for three o'clock. Zealley should be here before then. If not, I could always set the timing back.

There was nothing to do now except wait.

NEARLY a half hour passed from the time I finished my preparations, and I was beginning to think Zealley would be late, when the door of my compartment was kicked savagely open.

The man who followed the kick was lean and dark, with wavy brown hair combed meticulously into place. A bent nose dispelled any illusion of softness.

I was disappointed. If this was Zealley, it was not at all the way I had expected him to look. I had thought he would be more polished perhaps, more intelligent, with more of the outward signs of success.

This weighing I did with a fleeting glance, and passed to the two men who followed my first visitor: Roesler and the pale-faced youth. Roesler was wearing a yellow hat.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed where I had been lying and sat up. "Come in," I said.

The sarcasm was not wasted on Roesler. He kept his gaze on me, but spoke to the two men with him. "Stay by the door, George," he ordered the boy. "You, Steve," he addressed the lean man, "get on the other side of him. Stay close." He let himself ease into the lounge chair behind him.

I decided to stir things up a bit. "I see you brought a boy," I said, nodding at the one by the door. "This might turn out to be a man's job."

Roesler glanced aside at the youth, whose lips pulled away from his teeth and eyes filled with quick hate. He pulled a switchblade knife from his pocket and snapped it open.

I found myself making a swift reappraisal. The lad was not the simple hood type I had first judged him to be. There was a flat look about the wide whites of his eyes that warned of something apart from courage.

"Not yet, George," Roesler said, and his voice, though almost gentle, stopped the boy before he took a step.

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Roesler pulled his penknife from a coat pocket and began trimming his nails.

"Someday you're going to run out of fingernails," I said.

Roesler laughed soundlessly, amused.

I glanced unobtrusively at the clock. Ten minutes to three. Time passed slowly in a situation like this.

Roesler regarded me speculatively. "You don't seem very nervous," he said.

"Should I be?"

"I would think so," he said. "If I were in your position, I think I'd be nervous."

"Would you?"

"Take off your clothes," he said, with no change of tone.

I took in a long breath and began opening my shirt. Another glance at the clock told me I needed at least eight more minutes. I had to stall.

ROESLER made no attempt to hurry me. He was a man certain of his control of the situation.

I kicked off my shorts, the last of my clothes, and for the first time felt ill at ease. Standing stripped to the raw before these men put me at a mental disadvantage. I feared them only to the point of discretion, but I had lost a bit of my poise. I sat back on the edge of the bed and lit a cigarette, doing my best to appear unconcerned.

Roesler turned to the dark man. "The shade, Steve," he directed. "Pull it down a minute."

Steve did as he was told.

The fact that my skin glowed with a faint phosphorescent sheen in the semidarkness was no surprise to me.

Roesler leaned forward and the penknife, which he had set on one knee, slipped off. Without attention he caught it before it touched the floor.

Which confirmed my original suspicion. No one had reflexes that fast — except Zealley — and myself. I had estimated him correctly then. He had been too clever to expose himself to any searcher; he had disdained the prestige he might have acquired, staying in the background, but in a position where he could observe any pursuer if and when he appeared.

Roesler-Zealley had noted the brief play of understanding on my face and he nodded. "I had to be certain, Max," he said. "You've changed too, you know."

Which was true. The mites in our veins had altered us both considerably through the years. We had developed some small empathy with them and they often performed as we wished. It was not that they could read our thoughts. Their activities

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were probably only reactions to our emotional and glandular functions. Moreover, they acted as often in ways that suited their own designs, changing our body structures, and regulating our metabolisms, seemingly at random.

"What did you want with me, Max?" Zealley asked, still being very pleasant. "Did you come to join me in conquering the world?"

He was being facetious and I did not answer him. He knew why I was here.

Overhead a faint click came from the light globe, a sound that probably only I noticed, and I knew that my alarm had gone off. I judged it would take the police only a few minutes to reach here.

"Or are you going to pretend that the medics have found a way to boil the bugs out of us?" Zealley asked. Did I detect a concealed pleading for just that assurance?

I shook my head. "No, they haven't found any way, Howard," I obliterated the hope.

"Good old Max." Bitterness crept into his voice. "Faithful, selfless old Max. Going to save the world. Going to save the whole of humanity," he amended expansively.

He hadn't changed too much. Sarcasm had always come natural with him, which made it no more likable.

HE MIGHT have said dull, stupid, cloddish old Max. The words would have better matched the tone of his voice. At that, he might be right. The authorities back on our home world of New Nebraska had said pretty much the same thing, only more diplomatically.

"You and Zealley are different," I'd been told. "That was one of the reasons we made you a team, originally. Zealley is clever and imaginative, but basically an egotist. A to-hell-with-the-other-fellow character. Fortunately, you're not like him. You're a man who accepts his responsibilities, a man with a strong sense of duty. We know we can trust you." Whether it was actually trust or only that they had little choice, I had not let myself decide.

"We had such high hopes." Zealley was reminiscing, speaking more to himself than to me.

We had. We'd been a two-man survey crew, mapping out new territory for the future expansion of the human race. On a world listed only as TR768-L-14 on the star maps, we had run into disaster. We found the planet unfit for human habitation, but not before we'd been bitten several times by things we never did see.

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No infection had resulted and we thought little about it, until we were a good part of the way home. Gradually then we noticed a quickening of our sensory processes, a well-being of body too pronounced to be normal. During the next several weeks of flight, Zealley wrote a historical novel that I was certain would turn out to be a classic. I found myself mastering, without difficulty, higher math, which had always been beyond me before.

At the end of the third month we stopped needing sleep. During the days and nights that followed we conversed brilliantly on subjects that had not interested us before, and the depth of which we couldn't have fathomed if they had interested us. We were at a loss to explain the reason for the change, though we knew it tied in somehow with our stay on TR768-L-14, and probably with the things that had bitten us. The cause was of secondary importance; the marvel of the reality was what intrigued us. We looked forward with poorly restrained excitement to displaying our new mental and physical dexterity.

THE Space Bureau authorities were every bit as impressed as we had anticipated. The medics readily found that we had been infested by a germ, but by a benevolent germ, a true symbiote. That discovery was followed by months of tests and examinations.

Between sessions with our own medics and laboratory men and various visiting specialists, we amused ourselves by showing our new abilities. At least a dozen times a day I had to put someone down in an arm wrestle. Even when they devised a way to pit two against me at a time, I had little difficulty besting them.

Zealley's displays tended toward the more flamboyant. One of the tricks he delighted in was taking a razor blade, and, while his audience watched with repelled fascination, cut a long gash in his forearm. For an instant the blood would ebb out, then quickly clot and cease to flow. The next day he would show them the arm, where a thin red line at the most would remain to mark where the wound had been.

Apparently Zealley's reminiscing had kept pace with my own. "It seems such a shame, doesn't it, Max?" he asked. He was genuinely sad.

So was I.

Test results and theories developed fast in those early days. The findings showed that the symbiotes repaired damage and faults in our systems and protected us against disease. It was even hazarded that they would

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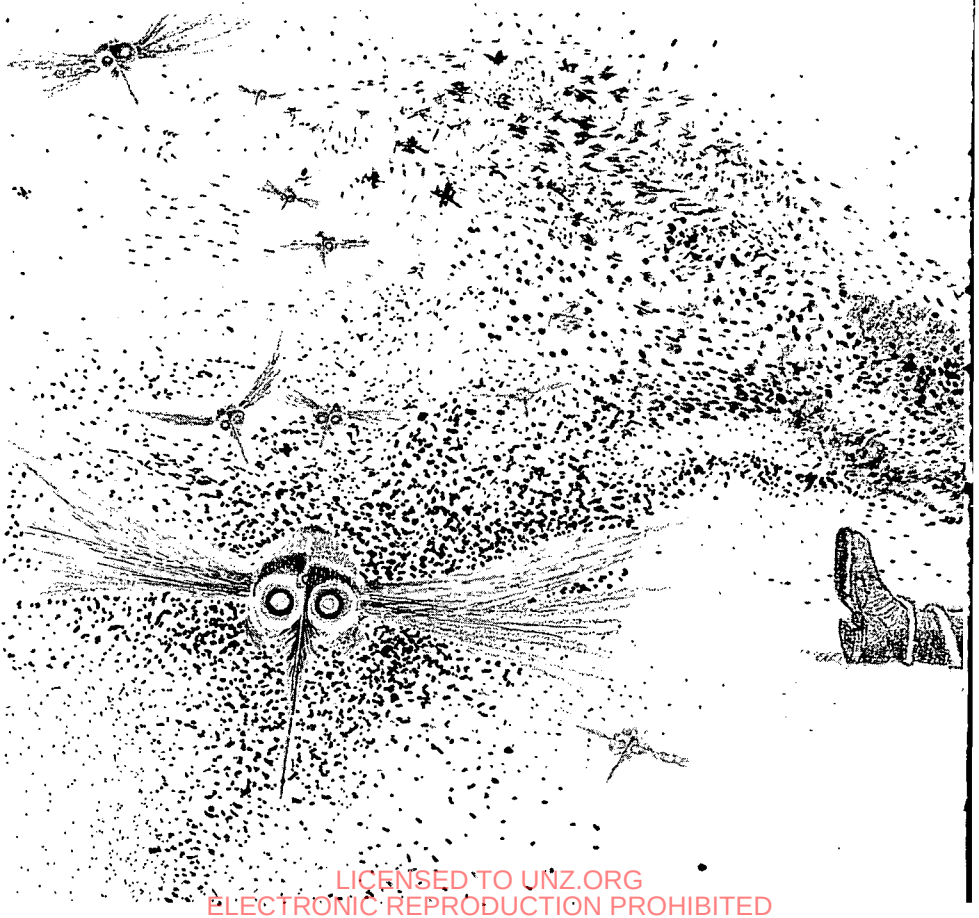
prolong our lives indefinitely.

Yet we were warned against complacency. The bug — we always spoke of it in the singular, even though we knew the original mites had spawned in our blood streams — could not act quickly enough to save our lives in the event of major damage to essential organs or the brain. Also, we could drown. Or we could die in a fall from a great height. Or starve to death.

The first intimation we had that all was not well had started as a rumor. Two of the staff biochemists had been experimenting with transplants of the bugs in fruit flies. They had turned up something sensational.

Zealley was not present when I received the disastrous news. At the end of what would normally be a twenty- or thirty-



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year cycle — the chemists were not able to estimate it any closer — the symbiotes evolved into tiny winged insects.

At that stage they acquired size and flying strength by devouring the tissues of their hosts.

In twenty or thirty years, then, our benign cohabitants would kill us — and spread out by the millions to infest other available animal life. Unless they were destroyed, not only would Zealley and I die, but all humanity on all the worlds would face the prospect of becoming infested.

Zealley must have surmised what was coming. He had disappeared a week earlier. Before he left, I had noticed considerable change in our body and facial features. He would very soon be impossible to identify.

The only lead the authorities

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ever got on him was that he had fled to Earth. At that particular time Earth and New Nebraska were involved in one of the more serious interworld bickerings. Citizens of each were denied admittance to the other, which was probably the reason Zealley had chosen Earth as a haven.

New Nebraska's authorities called me in and briefed me on what I was to do. They were able to smuggle me to Earth with forged papers that identified me as a citizen of another planet.

Zealley had to be found — and I was their one hope.

"YOU HAVE some interest in that clock?" Zealley's words jarred me out of my retrospection. Silently I cursed myself for letting my thoughts and eyes stray. I was dismayed, too, to find that only a few minutes had passed since I'd last looked. Even so, the police were taking longer than I had calculated.

Zealley abandoned all pretense of joviality. "Now, George," he said to the pale-faced youth, who still stood by the door with his knife in his hand.

The boy started toward me and I tensed, shifting my feet to face him. Something crashed against my right temple and only then did I remember Steve, the man behind me.

The force of the blow knocked me sideways but not unconscious. I started to turn and a second glancing blow split the skin across my forehead. I slid off the bed on the side away from him.

I retained just enough control of my faculties to get to my feet as the youth reached me and to grab him in a bear hug, but not fast enough to keep the long blade of his knife from ripping into my stomach.

The symbiote, though able to repair damage, was not able to block pain. The bite of the knife clenched my muscles in a spasm of agony, and dimly I heard the youth give a grunt of distress as my arms squeezed and bent him back at the waist.

Something landed on my foot — his knife. With blackness closing in, my arms lost their strength and I slid down his body.

I blanked out, but only for an instant. The kid had fallen with me and my hands clutched his ankles as I fought to stay conscious. I stood up, still holding his ankles. Putting everything I had into the effort, I swung him around and sent him crashing into Steve, who was just rounding the foot of the bed. They went down together.

I gasped in air, clutching the gash in my stomach with hands that were sticky and wet with

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blood. I turned toward Zealley. He was still seated in his chair, still smiling. One hand, resting negligently in his lap, held a snub-nosed pistol.

He could have killed me any time before this, but he had wanted the fun of watching me fight for my life. He opened his mouth to say something but closed it abruptly as someone pounded at the door.

"Come in!" I shouted through the froth in my mouth.

"Damn you," Zealley said softly. He wiped the pistol on his trousers and slid it across the floor away from him.

The door burst inward.

"These men tried to kill me," I told the two police officers.

ZEALLEY'S bland features simulated surprise. "I?" he asked. "I heard noise in here as I was passing in the hall. I came in to see what the trouble was."

"He's lying," I said as the policemen turned inquiringly toward me. "He's with them."

Zealley shook his head sadly. "He must be delirious — " he began, but the evidence was all on my side.

"Shut up!" one of the officers said, grabbing him by the shirt front and jerking him to his feet.

I had started dressing immediately. I wanted to hide the wound in my stomach. It burned, but I kept my face blank.

Zealley was silent now. If I had been just superficially wounded, his bluff would have worked — I'd have healed right there and then. I hadn't, so he had to wait for developments. I hoped I could give him some.

While one of the officers worked to revive the youth — the thug named Steve was already on his feet — I went to the bowl in the alcove and washed the blood off my hands and stomach.

They had the kid upright when I turned around. "Are you hurt bad?" the policeman holding Zealley asked me.

"Not too bad." I managed to keep my voice steady. "I'll be all right until you can send an ambulance."

He stood uncertainly for a moment. "I don't like to leave you alone, but I can put in a call from our cruiser. The ambulance should get here within ten minutes."

"I'll be OK," I said.

The sound of the closing door was the only way I had to know they were gone. For the past half minute, my tight grip on the bed headboard was all that held me erect. Now the starch went out of my body and I crumpled to the floor.

This time I did not blank out, but lay twisted and tight, waiting

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for the pain to stop — or to kill me.

A small easing of the torment came and I forced myself to relax. I was able now to steel my mind against the racking spasms and pull myself to my feet. I was not at all safe yet; even if I was not mortally wounded, it would take the symbiote hours to repair the damage.

I managed to pull on my clothes with numbed, awkward fingers and get out of the room before the ambulance arrived. I took with me only my grip. I would still need that.

There was small chance that the police could hold Zealley. He would probably be free on bail this same afternoon.

The odds were against me. I was fighting in Zealley's own back yard, wounded and entirely alone, while he must have been prepared for this contingency for years. But I had succeeded in the first part of my plan. I had found out who he was, and I had put him in a position where he could not use his superior resources, for a time at least. Now I had to get to him before he was able to mobilize those resources.

IN THE street, I had a violent attack of cramps in my upper diaphragm, and I got down on one knee and made a pretense of adjusting a shoe strap as I fought the torment. Perspiration gathered in clammy globules all over my body. When the pain left, I rose and pushed grimly on.

Opposite Minneapolis Mining's main offices, and a quarter of a block down, I found the type of commercial building I was looking for, and went in and sought out the building superintendent.

"Do you have an office for rent on one of the lower floors?" I asked him. "One that faces the front street?"

"We have several," he answered with professional courtesy. He thumbed through a row of cards and pulled out one with a small brown envelope attached. "Here's a fine office on the sixth floor. It's only one room, but — "

"I'll take a look at it," I interrupted him.

"Of course." He tore open the small envelope and took out a brass key. "I'll take you up."

"I'd rather go alone."

As he hesitated, I took out my billfold and separated a hundred-dollar bill from two others of its kind and laid it on his desk. "I'll leave a deposit — in case I should like it," I said, taking the key from his hand.

"I suppose it will be all right," he murmured doubtfully.

"Thank you," I called back over my shoulder. "I may be a while. I want to look it over

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carefully." I ignored the fact that he seemed to have more he wanted to say.

The office was small, but that made little difference to me. There was a clear view of the street from the window. That was all I cared about.

In one corner was a small packing case, left by the former tenant. I dragged it over by the window and sat down. From my grip I took a rifle barrel and stock and assembled them, and filled the magazine with ammunition. I kept part of my attention on the building down the street while I worked.

I hoped I had guessed right — that Zealley would get free of the police, and that he would return to his office.

The day-shift workers had begun to pour from the Mining building before a taxi drew up to the curb and a man in a yellow hat alighted.

Zealley had come.

He was alone. I aligned the sights of my rifle on his head, waited until I had a clear shot, and squeezed the trigger.

The yellow hat sprang upward and Zealley sank from sight among the hurrying workers.

The job was done.

FINDING a way back to New Nebraska took me a year, for I no longer fitted my passport picture and description at all.

"Except for the danger to others," I said when I reported in, "I wouldn't have bothered coming back."

"A good thing for you that you did bother to come back here," I was told.

The biochemists had gone on with their work through the years I'd searched for Zealley. They had learned that the symbiotes' life cycle developed in three distinct stages: five years of propagation, fifteen years in the dormant aging process, an undetermined number of years in the final form.

If the blood of a carrier was replaced any time during the first five years, the bugs in the residual blood in the body began to propagate again, delaying the aging process another five years.

"In other words," I was told, "we can control the symbiote. Mankind can reap the benefits — with not a single one of the dangers."

Except poor Zealley, I thought pityingly, but wonderingly. The hogs, the smart boys who have every angle figured in getting the jump on everybody else — how is it they never figure the last angle?

He should have waited instead of grabbing.

— CHARLES V. DE VET

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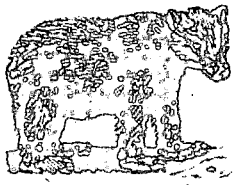
If Phelan was right, all worlds in the cosmos were freaks; only this one behaved as a world should. And its spectacular inhabitant was . . .



SNUFFLES

By R. A. LAFFERTY

Illustrated by HARRINGTON

I

"I ALWAYS said we'd find one of the them that was fun," remarked Brian. "There's been entirely too much solemnity in the universe. Did you never panic on thinking of the multiplicity of systems?"

"Never," said Georgina.

"Not even when, having set down a fine probability for the totality of worlds, you realized suddenly that you had to raise it by a dozen powers yet?"

"What's to panic?"

"Not even when it comes over you, 'This isn't a joke; this is serious; every one of them is serious.'?"

"'Cosmic intimidation,' Belloc called it. And it does tend to minimize a person."

"And did you never hope that out of all that prodigality of worlds, one at least should have been made for fun? One should have been made by a wild child or a mixed-up goblin just to put the rest of them in proper perspective, to deflate the pomposity of the cosmos."

"You believe this is it, Mr. Carroll?"

"Yes. Bellota was made for fun. It is a joke, a caricature, a burlesque. It is a planet with baggy pants and a putty nose. It is a midget world with floppy shoes and a bull-roarer voice. It

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was designed to keep the cosmos from taking itself too seriously. The law of levity here conspires against the law of gravity."

"I never heard of the law of levity. And Mr. Phelan believes that he will soon have the explanation for the peculiar gravity here."

"The law of levity does not apply to you, Georgina. You are immune. But I spoke lightly."

The theory that Bellota was made for a joke had not been proved; no more were the other theories about it. But it was a sport, a whole barrelful of puzzles, a place of interest all out of proportion to its size, eminently worthy of study. And the six of them had been set down there to study it.

SOCIABILITY impels — and besides they weren't a bad bunch at all. Meet them now, or miss them forever. They were six.

1. John Hardy. Commander and commando. As capable a man as ever lived. A good-natured conglomerate of clanking iron who was always in control. A jack of all techniques, a dynamic optimist. He had the only laugh that never irritated, however often heard, and he handled danger cavalierly. He was a blue-eyed, red-headed giant, and his face was redder than his hair.

2. William Malaquais (Uncle Billy) Cross. Engineer, machinist extraordinary, gadgeteer, theorist, arguefier, first mate, navigator, and balladier. Billy was a little older than the rest of them, but he hadn't mellowed. He said that he was still a green and growing boy.

3. Daniel Phelan. Geologist and cosmologist, and holder of heretical doctrines about field forces. "Phelan's Corollary" may be known to you; and, if so, you must be both intrigued and frustrated by the inherent contradictions that prevented its acceptance. A highly professional man in the domain of magnetism and gravity, he was also a low amateur rake and a determined wolf. A dude. Yet he could carry his share of the load.

4. Margaret Cot. Artist and photographer, botanist and bacteriologist. Full of chatter and a sort of charm. Better-looking than anyone deserves to be. Salty, really the newest thing in salinity. A little bit wanton. And a little kiddish.

5. Brian Carroll. Naturalist. And natural. He had been hunting for something all his life, but did not know what it was, and was not sure that he would know it when he found it, but he hoped that it would be different. "O Lord," he would pray, "however it ends don't let it have a pat ending. That I couldn't

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stand." He believed that anything repeated was trite. And it was for that reason that there were pleasant surprises for him on Bellota.

6. Georgina Chantal. Biologist and iceberg. But the capsule description may be unjust. For she was more than biologist and much more than iceberg. Frosty only when frostiness was called for, she was always proper and often friendly. But she was no Margie Cot, and in contrast perhaps she was a little icy.

Actually there wasn't a bad apple in that basket.

THE MOST obvious peculiarity of Bellota was its gravity, which was half that of Earth's, though the circumference of the globe was no more than a hundred miles. It was on account of this peculiarity that Daniel Phelan was on the little planet in the first place. For it was held by those who decide such things that there was a bare chance that he could find the answer; *no one else had found it.* His own idea was that his presence there was fruitless: he already had the answer to the gravity behavior of Bellota; it was contained in Phelan's Corollary. Bellota was the only body that behaved as it should. It was the rest of the universe that was atypical.

And in other ways Bellota was a joker. Fruits proved noisome and thorns succulent. Rinds and shells were edible and heart-meat was not. Proto-butterflies stung like hornets, and lizards secreted honeylike manna. And the water — the water was soda water — sheer carbonated soda water.

If you wanted it any other way, you caught rain water, and this was so highly nitric that drinking it was something of an experience also; for the thunder storms there were excessive.

No, they were not excessive, claimed Phelan, they were normal. It was on all other atmospheric planets known that there was a srange deficiency of thunder showers.

Here, at least, there was no deficiency: it rained about five minutes out of every fifteen, and the multi-colored lightning was omnipresent. In all their stay there, the party was never without the sound of thunder, near or distant, nor of the probe of lightning. For this reason there could be no true darkness there, not even between the flashes; there were flashes between the flashes. Here was meteorology concentrated, without dilution, without filler.

"But it is always different," said Georgina. "Every lightning flash is entirely different, just as

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every snowflake is different. Will it snow here?"

"Certainly," said Phelan. "Though it did not last night, it should tonight. Snow before midnight and fog by morning. After all, midnight and morning are only an hour apart."

At that time they had been on the planet only a few hours.

"And here the cycle is normal," said Phelan. "It is normal nowhere else. It is natural for humans and all other creatures to sleep for two hours and to wake for two hours. That is the fundamental cycle. Much of our misbehavior and perversity comes from trying to adapt to the weird day-night cycle of whatever alien world we happened to be borne on. Here within a week we will return to that normal that we never knew before.

"Within what kind of a week?" asked Hardy.

"Within Bellota's twenty-eight-hour week. And do you realize that the projected working week here would be just six and two-thirds hours? I always thought that that was long enough to work anyhow."

There were no seas there, only the soda-water lakes that covered a third of the area. And there were flora and fauna that burlesqued more than they really resembled Earth's and kindred worlds'.

The trees were neither deciduous nor evergreen (though Brian Carroll said that they were ever-green), nor palm. They were trees as a cartoonist might draw them. And there were animals that made the whole idea of animals ridiculous.

And there was Snuffles.

SNUFFLES was a bear — possibly — and of sorts. The bear is himself a caricature of animal-kind, somehow a giant dog, somehow a shaggy man, an ogre, and also a toy. And Snuffles was a caricature of a bear.

Billy Cross tried to explain to them about bears. Billy was an old bear *man*.

"It is the only animal that children dream of without having seen or been told about. Moncrief by his recall methods has studied thousands of early childhood dreams. Children universally dream of bears, Tahitian children subject to no ursine influence in themselves or their ancestry, Australian children, town tykes before they ever saw a bear toy. They dream of bears. The bear is the boogerman. Bears live in the attics of old childhood houses. They did in my own and in thousands of others. Their existence there is not of adult suggestion, but of innate childhood knowledge.

"But there is a duality about

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this boogerman. He is friendly and fascinating as well as frightening. The boogerman is not a story that adults tell to children. It is the only story that children tell to adults who have forgotten it."

"But how could you know?" asked Margie Cot. "I had no idea that little boys dreamed of bears. I thought that only girls did. And with us I had come to believe that the bear dreams symbolized grown man in his fundamental aspect, both fascinating and frightening."

"To you, Margie, everything symbolizes grown man in his fundamental aspect. Now the boogerman is also philologically interesting, being actually one of the less than two hundred Indo-European root words. Though *Bog* has come to mean God in the Slavic, yet the booger was earlier an animal-man demiurge, and the Sanscrit *bhaga* is not without this meaning. In the sense of a breaker, a smasher, it is in the Old Irish as *bong*, and the early Lithuanian as *banga*. In the sense of a devourer, it survives in the Greek root *phag*, and as one who puts to flight it is in the Latin *fug*. We have, of course, the Welsh *bwg*, a ghost, and *bogey* has been used in the meaning of the devil. And we have *bugbear*, which rounds out the circuit."

"So you make God and the Bear and the Devil one," said Georgina.

"In many mythologies it was the bear who made the world," said John Hardy. "After that he did nothing distinguished. It was felt by his devotees that he had done enough."

Snuffles was not a bear exactly. He was a pseudo-ursine. He was big and clumsy, and bounced around on four legs, and then up on two. He was friendly, chillingly so, for he was huge. And he snuffled like some old track-eating train.

He was a clown, but he seemed to observe the line that the visitors drew. He did not come really close, though often too close for comfort. He obeyed, or when he did not wish to obey, he pretended to misunderstand. He was the largest animal on Bellota, and there seemed to be only one of him.

"WHY DO we call him he?" asked Brian Carroll, the naturalist. "Only surgery could tell for sure, but it appears that Snuffles has no sex at all. There is no way I know of that he could reproduce. No wonder there is only one of him; the wonder is that there should be any at all. Where did he come from?"

"That could be asked of any

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creature," said Daniel Phelan. "The question is, where is he going? But he shows a certain sophistication in this. For it is only with primitives that toy animals (and he is a toy, you know) are sexed. A modern teddy bear or a toy panda isn't. Nor were the toys in the European tradition except on the fringes (Tartary before the ninth century, Ireland before the fifth) since pre-classical times. But before those times in its regions, and beyond its pale even today, the toy animals are totems and are sexed, exaggeratedly so."

"Yes, there is no doubt about it," said Brian. "He does not have even the secondary characteristics of mammal, marsupial, or what you will. But he has characteristics enough of his own."

Snuffles was, among other things, a mimic. Should a book be left around, and they were a bookish bunch, he would take it in his forepaws and hold it as to read, and turn the pages, turn them singly and carefully. He could use his padded paws as hands. His claws were retractable and his digits projective. They were paws, or they were claws, or they were hands; and he had four of them.

He unscrewed caps and he could use a can opener. He kept the visitors in firewood, once he understood that they had need of it, and that they wanted dry sticks of a certain size. He'd bite the sticks to length, stack them in small ricks, bind them with lianas, and carry them to the fire. He'd fetch water and put it on to boil. And he gathered bellotas by the bushel.

Bellota means an acorn, and they had named the planet that from the profusion of edible fruit-nuts that looked very like the acorn. These were a delicacy that became a staple.

And Snuffles could talk. All his noises were not alike. There was the "snokle, snokle, snokle" that meant he was in a good humor, as he normally was. There was a "snook, snook" and a "snoof." There were others similar in vocables but widely varied in tone and timbre. Perhaps Billy Cross understood him best, but they all understood him a little.

In only one thing did Snuffles become stubborn. He marked off a space, a wild old pile of rocks, and forbade them to enter its circle. He dug a trench around it and he roared and bared foot-long fangs if any dared cross the trench. Billy Cross said that Snuffles did this to save face; for Commander John Hardy had previously forbidden Snuffles a certain area, their supply dump and weapons center. Hardy had drawn a line around it with a mattock

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and made it clear that Snuffles should never cross that line. The creature understood at once, and he went and did likewise.

THE PARTY had been set down there for two Earth weeks—twelve Bellota weeks—to study the life of the planetoid, to classify, to take samples, tests, notes, and pictures; to hypothesize and to build a basis for theory. But they ventured hardly at all from their original campsite. There was such an amazing variety of detail at hand that it would take many weeks even to begin to classify it.

A feature there was the rapidity of enzyme and bacterial action. A good wine could be produced in four hours, and a fungus-cheese made from grub exudations in even less time. And in the new atmosphere thoughts also seemed to ferment rapidly.

"Every person makes one major mistake in his life," said John Hardy to them once. "Were it not for that, he would not have to die."

"What?" quizzed Phelan. "Few die violently nowadays. How could all die for a mistake?"

"Yet it's a fact. Deaths are not really explained, for all the explanations of medicine. A death will be the result of one single much earlier rashness, of one weakening of the mind or body, or a crippling of the regenerative force. A person will be alive and vital. And one day he will make one mistake. In that moment the person begins to die. But if a man did not make that one mistake, he would not die."

"Poppycock," said Daniel Phelan.

"I wonder if you know the true meaning of 'poppycock'?" asked Billy Cross. "It is popy-talk, opium-talk, the rambling of one under the narcotic. Now the element 'cock' in the word is not (as you would imagine) from either the Norwegian *kok*, a dung heap, nor from *coquarde* in the sense that Rabelaise uses it, but rather from—"

"Poppycock," said Phelan again. He disliked Billy Cross's practice of analyzing all words, and he denied his assertion that a man who uses a word without feeling its full value is a dealer in false coinage, in fact a liar.

"But if a person dies only by making a mistake, how does an animal die?" asked Margie Cot. "Does he also make a mistake?"

"He makes the mistake of being an animal and not a man," said Phelan.

"There may be no clear line between animal and man," Margie argued.

"There is," said Phelan, and three others agreed.

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"There is not," said Billy Cross.

"An animal is paradoxically a creature without an *anima* — without a soul," said Phelan. "This comes oddly from me because I also deny it to man in its usual connotation. But there is a total difference, a line that the animal cannot cross, and did not cross. When we arrive at wherever we are going, he will still be skulking in his den."

"Here, at least, it is the opposite of that," said Brian Carroll. "Snuffles sleeps in the open, and it is we who den."

IT WAS TRUE. Around their campsite, their supply dump and weapons center, there were three blind pockets, grottoes back in the rocks. Billy Cross, Daniel Phelan, and Margie Cot each had one of these, filled with the tools of their specialties. Here they worked and slept. And these were dens.

John Hardy himself slept in the weapons center, inside the circle where Snuffles was forbidden. And the hours that he did not sleep he kept guard. Hardy made a fetish of security. When he slept, or briefly wandered about the region, someone else must always take a turn at guard, weapon at hand. There was no relaxation of this, no exception, no chance of a mistake.

And Snuffles, the animal, who right out slept in the open ("Is it possible," Brian asked himself, "that I am the only one who notices it? It is possible that it happens?") did not get wet. It rained everywhere on that world. But it did not rain on Snuffles.

"The joy of this place is that it is not pat," said Brian Carroll. As previously noted, he hated anything that was pat. "We could be here for years and never see the end of the variety. With the insects there may be as many species as there are individuals. Each one could almost be regarded as a sport, as if there were no standard to go by. The gravity here is cockeyed. Please don't analyze the word, Billy; I doubt myself that it means rooster-eyed. The chemistry gives one a hopeful feeling. It uses the same building blocks as the chemistry elsewhere, but it is as if each of those blocks were just a little off. The lightning is excessive, as though whoever was using it had not yet tired of the novelty; I never tired of the novelty of lightning myself. And when this place ends, it will not have a pat ending. Other globes may turn to lava or cold cinders. Bellota will pop like a soap bubble, or sag like spaghetti, or turn into an exploding world of grasshoppers. But it won't conform. I love Bellota. And I do hate a pat ending."

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"There is an old precept of 'Know thyself,'" said Georgina Chantal. They talked a lot now, as they were often wakeful, not yet being accustomed to the short days and nights of Bellota. "Its variant is 'Look within.' Look within, but our eyes point outward! The only way we can see our faces is in a mirror or in a picture. Each of us has his mirror, and mine is more often the microscope. But we cannot see ourselves as we are until we see ourselves distorted. That is why Snuffles is also a mirror for all of us here. We can't understand why we're serious until we know why he's funny."

"We may be the distortion and he the true image," said Billy Cross. "He lacks jealousy and pomposity and greed and treachery — all the distortions."

"We do not know that he lacks them," said Daniel Phelan.

So they talked away the short days and nights on Bellota, and accumulated data.

II

WHEN IT happened, it happened right in narrow daylight. The phrase was Brian's, who hated a pat phrase. It happened right in the middle of the narrow two-hour Bellota day.

All were awake and aware. John Hardy stood in the middle of the weapons center on alert guard with that rifle cradled in the crook of his arm. Billy and Daniel and Margaret were at work in their respective dens; and Brian and Georgina, who did not den, were gathering insects at the open lower end of the valley, but they had the center in their sight.

There was an unusual flash of lightning, bright by even Bellota standards, and air snapped and crackled. And there was an unusual sound from Snuffles, far removed from his usual "snokle, snokle" talk.

And in a moment benignity seemed to drain away from that planet.

Snuffles had before made as if to cross the line, and then scooted off, chortling in glee, which is perhaps why the careful John Hardy was not at first alarmed.

Then Snuffles charged with a terrifying sound.

But Hardy was not tricked entirely; it would be impossible for man or beast to trick him entirely. He had a split second, and was not one to waste time making a decision, and he was incapable of panic. What he did, he did of choice. And if it was a mistake, why, even the shrewdest decision goes into the books as a mistake if it fails.

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He was fond of Snuffles and he gambled that it would not be necessary to kill him. It was a heavy rifle; a shoulder shot should have turned the animal. If it did not, there would not be time for another shot.

It did not, though, and there was not. Commander John Hardy made one mistake and for that he died. He died uncommonly, and he did not die from the inside out, as meaner men do.

It was ghastly, but it was over in an instant. Hardy's head was smashed and his face nearly swiped off. His back was broken and his body almost sheared in two. The great creature, with the foot-long canines and claws like twenty long knives mangled him and crushed him and shook him like a red mop, and then let go.

It may be that Brian Carroll realized most quickly the implications. He called to Georgina to come out of the valley onto the plain below, and to come out fast. He realized that the other three still alive would not even be able to come out.

INCONGRUOUSLY, a thing that went through Brian Carroll's mind was a tirade of an ancient Confederate general against ancient General Grant, to the effect that the blundering fool had moved into a position that commanded both river and hill and blocked three valley mouths, and it could only be hoped that Grant would move along before he realized his advantage.

But Brian was under no such delusion. Snuffles realized his advantage; he occupied the supply dump and weapons center, and commanded the entrances to the three blind pockets that were the dens of Billy Cross and Daniel Phelan and Margie Cot.

With one move, Snuffles had killed the leader, cornered three of the others, and cut off the remaining two from base weapons, to be hunted down later. There was nothing unintentional about it. Had he chosen another moment, when another than John Hardy was on guard, then Hardy alive would still somehow have been a threat to him, even weaponless. But, with Hardy dead, all the rest were no match for the animal.

Brian and Georgina lingered on the edge of the plain to watch the other three, though they knew that their own lives depended on getting out of there.

"Two could get away," said Georgina, "if a third would make a rush for it and force Snuffles into another charge."

"But none of them will," said Brian. "The third would die."

It was a game, but it couldn't last long. Phelan whimpered and

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tried to climb the rock wall at the blind end of his pocket. Margie cajoled and told Snuffles how good friends they had always been, and wouldn't he let her go? Billy Cross filled his pipe and lit it and sat down to wait it out.

Phelan went first, and he died like a craven. But no one, not sure how he himself might die, should hold that overly against a man.

Snuffles thundered in, cut him down in the middle of a scream, and rushed back to his commanding spot in the middle of the weapons center.

Margie spread out her hands and began to cry, softly, not really in terror, when he attacked. The pseudo-bear broke her neck, but with a blow that was almost gentle in comparison with the others, and he scurried again to the center.

And Billy Cross puffed on his pipe. "I hate to go like this, Snuff, old boy. In fact, I hate to go at all. If I made a mistake to die for, it was in being such a pleasant, trusting fellow. I wonder if you ever noticed, Snuff, what a fine, upstanding fellow I really am?"

And that was the last thing Billy Cross ever said, for the big animal struck him dead with one tearing blow. And the smoke still drifted in the air from Billy's pipe.

THEN it was like black thunder coming out of the valley after the other two, for that clumsy animal could move. They had a start on him, Brian and Georgina had, of a hundred yards. And soon their terror subsided to half-terror as they realized that the shoulder-shot bear animal could not catch them till they were exhausted.

In a wild run, they could even increase their lead over him. But they would tire soon and they did not know when he would tire. He had herded them away from the campsite and the weapons. And they were trapped with him on a small planet.

Till day's end, and through the night, and next day (maybe five hours in all) he followed them until they could hardly keep going. Then they lost him, but in the dark did not know if he was close or not. And at dawn they saw him sitting up and watching them from a quarter of a mile away.

But now the adversaries rested and watched. The animal may have stiffened up from his shot. The two humans were so weary that they did not intend to run on again till the last moment.

"Do you think there is any chance that it was all a sudden fury and that he may become friendly again?" Georgina asked Brian.

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"It was not a sudden fury. It was a series of very calculated moves."

"Do you think we could skirt around and beat him back to the weapons center?"

"No. He has chosen a spot where he can see for miles. And he has the interceptor's advantage — any angle we take has to be longer than his. We can't beat him back and he knows it."

"Do you think he knows that the weapons are weapons?"

"Yes."

"And that all our signal equipment is left at the center and that we can't communicate?"

"Yes."

"Do you think he's smarter that we are?"

"He was smarter in selecting his role. It is better to be the hunter than the hunted. But it isn't unheard of for the hunted to outsmart the hunter."

"Brian, do you think you would have died as badly as Daniel or as well as Billy?"

"No. No to both."

"I was always jealous of Margie, but I loved her at the end. She didn't scream. She didn't act scared. Brian, what will happen to us now?"

"Possibly we will be saved in the nick of time by the Marines."

"I didn't know they had them any more. Oh, you mean the ship. But that's still a week away, Earth time. Do you think Snuffles knows it is to come back for us?"

"Yes, he knows. I'm sure of that."

"Do you think he knows when it will come?"

"Yes, I have the feeling that he knows that too."

"But will he be able to catch us before then?"

"I believe that all parties concerned will play out the contest with one eye on the clock."

SNUFFLES had now developed a trick. At sundown of the short day, he would give a roar and come at them. And they would have to start their flight just as the dark commenced. They ran more noisily than he and he would always be able to follow them; but they could never be sure in the dark that he was following, or how closely. They would have to go at top panting, gasping, thumping speed for an hour and a half; then they would ease off for a little in the half hour before dawn. And in the daytime one of them had to watch while the other slept. But Snuffles could sleep as he would, and they were never able to slip away without his waking instantly.

Moreover, he seemed to herd them through the fertile belt on their night runs and let them rest on the barrens in the daytime.

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It wasn't that food was really scarce; it was that it could only be gathered during time taken from flight and sleep and guard duty.

They also came on a quantity of red fruit that had a weakening and dizzying effect on them, yet they could hardly leave it alone. There was a sort of bean sprout that had the same effect, and a nut, and a cereal grass whose seed they winnowed with their hands as they went along.

"This is a narcotic belt," said Brian. "I wish we had the time to study it longer, and yet we may get all too much of studying it. We have no idea how far it goes, and this method of testing its products on ourselves may be an effective one, but dangerous."

From that time on, they were under the influence of the narcotics. They dreamed vividly while awake and walking. And they began to suffer hallucinations which they could not distinguish from reality.

It was only a Bellota day or so after their dreaming began that Brian Carrol felt that the mind of Snuffles was speaking to him. Carroll was an intelligent amateur in that field and he put it to the tests; there are valid tests for it. And he concluded that it was hallucination and not telepathy. Still (and he could see it coming) there would be a time when he would accept his hallucination and believe that the ursine was talking to him. And that would signal that he was crazy and no longer able to evade death there.

Carroll renounced (while he still had his wits) his future belief in the nonsense, just as a man put to torture may renounce anything he concedes or confesses or denies under duress.

YET, whatever frame it was placed in, Snuffles talked to him from a distance. "Why do you think me a bear because I am in a bear skin? I do not think you a man, though you are in a man skin. You may be a little less. And why do you believe you will die more bravely than Daniel? The longer you run, the meaner will be your death. And you still do not know who I am?"

"No," said Brian Carroll aloud.

"No what?" asked Georgina Chantal.

"It seems that the bear is talking to me, that he has entered my mind."

"Me also. Could it be, or is it the narcotic fruit?"

"It couldn't be. It is hallucination brought on by the narcotics, and tiredness from travel, and lack of sleep — and our shock at seeing our friends killed by a toy turned into a monster. There

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are tests to distinguish telepathic reception from hallucination: objective corroboration, impossible at this time (with Snuffles in his present mood) and probably impossible at any time; sentient parallelism — surely uncertain, for I have more in common with millions of humans than with one pseudo-ursine; circumstantial validity and point-for-point clarity — this is negative, for I know myself to be fevered and confused and my senses unreliable in other matters. By every test that can be made, the indication is that it is not telepathy, that it is hallucination."

"But there isn't any way to be *sure*, is there, Brian?"

"None, Georgina; no more than I can prove that it is not a troup of Boy Scouts around a campfire that is causing pain and burning in my gullet, that it is really the narcotic fruit or something else I have eaten conspiring with my weariness and apprehension to discomfort me. I cannot prove it is not Boy Scouts and I cannot prove it is not telepathy, but I consider both unlikely."

"I don't think it is unlikely at all, Brian. I think that Snuffles is talking to me. When you get a little nuttier and tireder, then you'll believe it too."

"Oh, yes — I'll believe it then — but it won't be true."

"It won't matter if it's true or not. Snuffles will have gained his point. Do you know that Snuffles is king of this world?"

"No. What are you talking about?"

"He just told me he was. He told me that if I would help him catch you, he would let me go. But I won't do it. I have become fond of you, Brian. Did you know that I never did like men before?"

"Yes. You were called the iceberg."

"But now I like you very much."

"You have no one else left to like."

"It isn't that. It's the mood I'm in. And I won't help Snuffles catch you unless he gives me very much better reasons for it."

Damn the girl! If she believed Snuffles talked to her, then for all practical purposes he did. And, however the idea of a trade for her life had been implanted in her mind, it would grow there.

Now Snuffles talked to Brian Carroll again, and it was somehow a waste of time to intone the formality that it was hallucination only.

"You still do not know what I am, but you will have to learn it before you die. Hardy knew it at the last minute. Cross guessed it from the first. Phelan still isn't sure. He goes about and looks

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back at his body lying there, and he still isn't sure. Some people are very hard to convince. But the girl knew it and she spread out her hands."

In his fever, that was the way the bear animal talked to him.

They ate leaves now and buds. They would have no more of the narcotic fruits even if they had to starve. But narcosis left them slowly, and the pursuit of them tightened.

It was just at sunset one day that disaster struck at Brian. The bear had near hypnotized him into immobility, talking inside his head. Georgina had started on before him and repeatedly called for him to follow, but for some reason he loitered. When Snuffles made his sudden sundown charge, there seemed no escaping him. Brian was trapped on a rim-rock. Georgina had already taken a winding path to the plain below. Brian hesitated, then held his ground for the bruin's charge. He believed that he could draw Snuffles on, and then break to the left or the right at the last instant, and perhaps the animal would plunge over the cliff.

But old Snuff modified but did not halt his charge at the last minute. He came in bottom-side first, like an elephant sliding bases, and he knocked Brian off the cliff.

There are few really subjective accounts of dying, since most who die do not live to tell about it. But the way it goes is this:

First one hangs in space; then he is charged by the madly rising ground armed with trees and rocks and weapons. After that is a painful sleep, and much later a dazed wakening.

III

HE was traveling upside down, that was sure, and roughly, though at a slow rate of speed. Perhaps that is the normal way for people to travel after they are dead. He was hung from the middle in an odd doubled-up manner, and seemed supported and borne along by something of a boatlike motion, yet of a certain resilience and strength that was more living than even a boat. It had a rough softness, this thing, and a pleasant fragrance.

But, though it was bright morning now, it was hard to get a good look at the thing with which he was in contact. All he could see was grass flowing slowly by, and heels.

Heels?

What was this all about? Heels and backs of calves, no more.

He was being carried, carried slung like a sack over her shoulder by Georgina. For the

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thing of the pleasant fragrance was Georgina Chantal.

She set him down then. It was a very rough valley they were in, and he saw that they had traveled perhaps four miles from the base of the rim-rock; and Snuffles had settled down in the morning light a quarter of a mile behind them.

"Georgina, did you carry me all night?"

"Yes."

"How could you?"

"I changed shoulders sometimes. And you aren't very heavy. This is only a half-gravity planet. Besides, I'm very strong. I could have carried you even on Earth."

"Why wasn't I killed by the fall?"

"Snuffles says he isn't ready to kill you yet, that he could kill you any time he wanted to with the lightning or rock or poison berry. But you did hit terribly hard. I was surprised to be able to pick you up in one piece. And now Snuffles says that I have lost my last chance."

"How?"

"Because I carried you away from him before he could get down the cliff in the dark. Now he says he will kill me too."

"Snuff is inconsistent. If he could kill me any instant with the lightning, why would he be angered if you carried me away from him?"

"I thought of that too. But he says he has his own reasons. And that lightning — do you know that it doesn't lighten all the time everywhere on Bellota? Only in a big circle around Snuffles, as a tribute to him. I've noticed myself that when we get a big lead over him, we almost move clear out of the lightning sphere."

"Georgina, that animal doesn't really talk to us. It is only our imaginations. It is not accurate to so personify it."

"It may not be accurate, but if that isn't talk he puts out, then I don't know talk. And a lot of his talk he makes come true. But I don't care if he does kill me for saving you. I'm silly over you now."

"We are both of us silly, Georgina, from the condition we are in. But he can't talk to us. He's only an animal run amok. If it were anything else, it would mean that much of what we know is not so."

BRIAN had the full effect of it one sunny afternoon a couple of Bellota days later. He was dozing and Georgina was on guard when Snuffles began to talk inside his head.

"You insult me that you do not recognize my identity. When Hardy said that in many mythologies it was the Bear who made

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the world, he had begun to guess who I was. I am the creator and I made the world. I have heard that there are other worlds besides Bellota, and I am not sure whether I made them or not. But if they are there, I must have made them. They could not have made themselves. And this I did make.

"It isn't an easy thing, or all of you would have made them, and you have not. And there is pride in creation that you could not understand. You said that Bellota was made for fun. It was *not* made for fun. I am the only one who knows why it was made, for I made it. And it is not a little planet; it is a grand planet. I waited for you to confess your error and be amazed at it. Since you did not, you will have to die. I made you, so I can kill you if I like. I must have made you, since I made all. And if I did not, then I made other things, red squirrels and white birds.

"You have no idea of the achievement itself. I had very little to work with and no model or plans or previous experience. And I made mistakes. I would be the last to deny that. I miscalculated the gravity, a simple mathematical error that anyone could make. The planet is too small for the gravity, but I had already embodied the calculated gravity in other works that I did not choose to undo, and I had no material to make a larger planet. So what I have made I have made, and it will continue so. An error, once it is embodied, becomes a new truth.

"You may wonder why my birds have hair. I will confess it, I did not know how to make feathers, nor could you without template or typus. And you are puzzled that my butterflies sting and my hornets do not? But how was I to know that those fearfully colored monsters should have been harmless? It ill befits one who has never made even the smallest — but why do I try to explain this to you?

"You wonder if I am talking to you or if it is only a delusion of your mind. What is the difference? How could there be anything in your mind if I did not put it there? And do not be afraid of dying. Remember that nothing is lost. When I have the pieces of you, I will use them to make other things. That is the law of conservation of matter as I understand it.

"But do you know that the one thing desired by all is really praise? It is the impelling force, and a creator needs this more than anyone. Things and beings are made to give praise, and if they do not, they are destroyed again. You had every opportunity to give it, and instead you jeered.

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"Did any of you ever make a world? I tell you that there are a million things to remember all at once. And there can be no such thing as a bad world, since each of them is a triumph. Whether it was that I made the others and I forgot them is only a premise; or whether I will make them in the future, and they are only now talked of out of their proper time. But some of your own mythologies indicate that I made your own.

"I would tell you more, only you would not understand it. But after I have conserved your matter, then you will know all these things."

"SNUFFLES is cranky with me today," said Georgina Chantal. "Is he also cranky with you?"

"Yes," said Brian Carroll.

"He says that he made Bellota. Did he tell you that too? Do you believe it?"

"He told me. I do not believe it. We are delirious. Snuffles cannot communicate."

"You keep saying that, but you aren't sure. He told me that when he chews us up he will take a piece of me and a piece of you and chew them together and make a new thing, since we are belatedly taken with each other. Isn't that nice?"

"How cozy."

"I wonder why he made the grass so sharp, though. There is no reason for it to be like that."

"Why, and what?"

"Snuffles. Why did he make the grass so sharp? My shoes are nearly gone and it's killing me."

"Georgina hold onto what's left of your mind. Snuffles did not make the grass or anything else. He is only an animal, and we are sick and walking in delirium."

So they walked on a while, for evening had come. Then the voice of Snuffles came again inside the head of Brian.

"How was I to know that the grass should not be sharp? Are not all pointed things sharp? Who would have guessed that it should be soft? If you had told me gently, and without shaming me, I would have changed it at once. Now I will not. Let it wound you!"

So they lived with it, and continued on for several short days and nights.

"Brian, do you think that Snuffles knows the world is round?"

"If he made it, he must know it,"

"Oh, yes, I had forgotten."

"Dammit, girl, I was being ironic! And you are now quite nutty, and I hardly less so. Of course he didn't make it. And of course he doesn't know that it's round. He's only an animal."

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"Then we have an advantage back again."

"Yes. I'd have noticed it before if I hadn't been so confused. We are more than halfway around the little planet. He is no longer between us and our weapons center, but he behaves as though he thought he was. We have no more than forty miles to go to it. We will step up our pace, though gradually. Our old camp valley is prominent enough so that we could recognize it within several miles either way, and we can navigate that close. And if he seems to say in your mind that he is onto our trick, do not believe him. The animal does not really talk to our minds."

BUT THEIR narcosis still increased. "It isn't a narcotic belt" said Brian. "It is a narcotic season on all Bellota — a built-in saturnalia. But we have not been able to enjoy the carnival."

"Snuffles shows up well as a carnival king, though, don't you think? It is easier to believe in time of carnival that he made the cosmos. I went to the big carnival once in Nola when I was a little girl. There was a big bear wearing a crown on one of the floats, and I believe that he was king of the carnival. It wasn't an ordinary bear. I am sure now that it represented Snuffles, though I was only six years old when I saw it. Do you think that Snuffles' explanation of the law of gravity here is better than Phelan's?"

"More easily understandable at least than the corollary, and probably more honest. I always thought that the corollary also embraced a simple mathematical error and that Phelan stuck to it out of perversity."

"It is one thing to stick to an error. It is another to build a world to conform to it. Brian, do you know what hour it is?"

"It is the three hundred and twelfth since we were set down."

"And they return for us at the three hundred and thirty-sixth. We will be back at our campsite and in control by then, won't we?"

"If we are ever to make it back and be in control, we should make it by then. Are you tired, Georgina?"

"No. I will never again be tired. I have been walking in a dream too long for that. But I never felt more pleasurable than now. I look down at my feet which are a sorry mess, but they don't seem to be my feet. Only a little while ago I felt sorry for a girl in such a state, and then I came to half realize that the girl was me. But the realization didn't carry a lot of conviction. It doesn't seem like me."

"I feel disembodied myself.

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But I don't believe that this comical old body that I observe will carry me much farther."

"Snuffles is trying to talk to us."

"Yes, I feel him. No, dammit, Georgina, we will not give in to that nonsense. Snuffles is only a wounded old bear that is trailing us. But our hallucination is coming again. It will take a lot of theory to cover a dual hallucination."

"Hush, I want to hear what he says."

Then Snuffles began to talk inside the heads of the two of them.

"If you know and do not tell me, then you are guilty of a peculiar affront. A maker cannot remember everything, and I had forgotten some of the things that I had made before. But we are coming on a new world now that is very like Bellota. Can it be that I have only repeated myself, and that I did not improve each time? These hills here I made once before. If you know, then you must tell me now. It may be that I cannot wait to chew your brains to find out about it. How will I ever make a better world if I make them all alike?"

"He has forgotten that he made it round, Brian."

"Georgina, he did not make anything. It is our own minds trying to reassure us that he does not know we are ahead of him and going toward our weapons."

"But how do we both hear the same thing if he isn't talking to us?"

"I don't know. But I prefer it the way it is. I never did like easy answers."

THEN there came the evening when they were within sight of their original valley; and if they moved at full speed through the night, they should reach their campsite very soon after dawn.

"But the weariness is beginning to creep up through the narcosis," said Brian. "Now I'm desiring the effect that we tried to avoid before."

"But what has happened?"

"I believe that the narcotic period of the planet is over. The carnival is coming to an end."

"Do you know something, Brian? We did not have to go around the world at all. At any time we could have separated and outmaneuvered him. He could not have intercepted both of us going toward the weapons pile if we went different ways. But we could not bear to part."

"That is a woman's explanation."

"Well, let's see you find another one. You didn't want to be parted from me, did you, Brian?"

"No, I didn't."

It was a rough, short night,

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but it would be the last. They moved in the agony of a cosmic hangover.

"I've become addicted," said Brian, "and the fruit has lost its numbing properties. I don't see how it is possible for anyone to be so tired."

"I'd carry you again if I weren't collapsing myself."

"Dammit, you couldn't! You're only a girl!"

"I am not only a girl! Nobody is only an anything. Our trouble here may have started with your thinking that Snuffles was only an animal, and he read your thoughts and was insulted."

"He did not read my thoughts. He *is* only an animal. And I will shoot his fuzzy hide full of holes when we get to our campsite. Let's keep on with it and not take any chances of his catching or passing us in the dark."

"How could Phelan's corollary apply to this planet and no other when he had never been here then?"

"Because, as I often suspected, Phelan had a touch of the joker in him and he composed it sardonically."

"Then he made it for fun. And do you still think that Bellota was made for fun?"

"The fun has developed a grotesque side to it. I am afraid I will have to put an end to a part of that fun. The dark is coming, and there is our campsite, and we are in the clear. I'll make it before I drop if I have to bust a lung. There's an elephant gun with a blaster attachment that I'll take to that fur-coated phony. We're going to have bear steak for breakfast."

HE ACHIEVED the campsite. He had reached the wobbly state, but he still ran. He was inside the circle and at the gun stack, when a roar like double thunder froze his ears and his entrails.

He leaped back, fell, rolled, crawled, snaked his way out of reach; and the sudden shock of it bewildered him.

And there was Snuffles sitting in the middle of the supply dump and smoking the pipe of Billy Cross.

And when the words rattled inside Brian's head again, how could he be sure that it was hallucination and not the bear talking to him?

"You thought that I had forgotten that Bellota was round? If you knew how much trouble I had making it as round as it is, you would know that I could never forget it."

Georgina came up, but fell to her knees in despair when she saw that Snuffles was there ahead of them.

"I can't run any more, Brian,

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and I know that you can't. I am down and I can never get up again. How soon will they get here?"

"The Marines?"

"Yes, the ship."

"Too late to help us. I used to wish they would be late just once. I am getting that wish, but it isn't as amusing as I anticipated."

SNUFFLES KNOCKED out his pipe then, as a man would; and laid it carefully on a rock. Then he came out and killed them: Georgina, the friendly iceberg, and Brian, who did hate a pat ending.

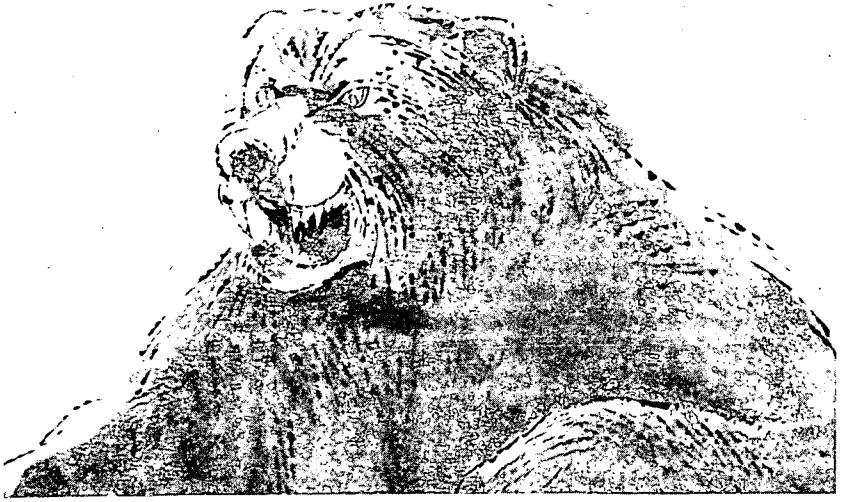
And Snuffes was still king of Bellota.

THE REPORT of the ship read in part:

"No explanation of the fact that no attempt seems to have been made to use the weapons, though two of the party were killed nearly a week later than the others. All were mangled by the huge pseudo-ursine which seems to have run amok from eating the local fruit, seasonally narcotic. Impossible to capture animal without unwarranted delay of takeoff time. Gravitational incongruity must await fuller classification of data."

THE NEXT world that Snuffles made embodied certain improvements, and he did correct the gravity error, but it still contained many elements of the grotesque. Perfection is a very long, very hard road.

— R. A. LAFFERTY



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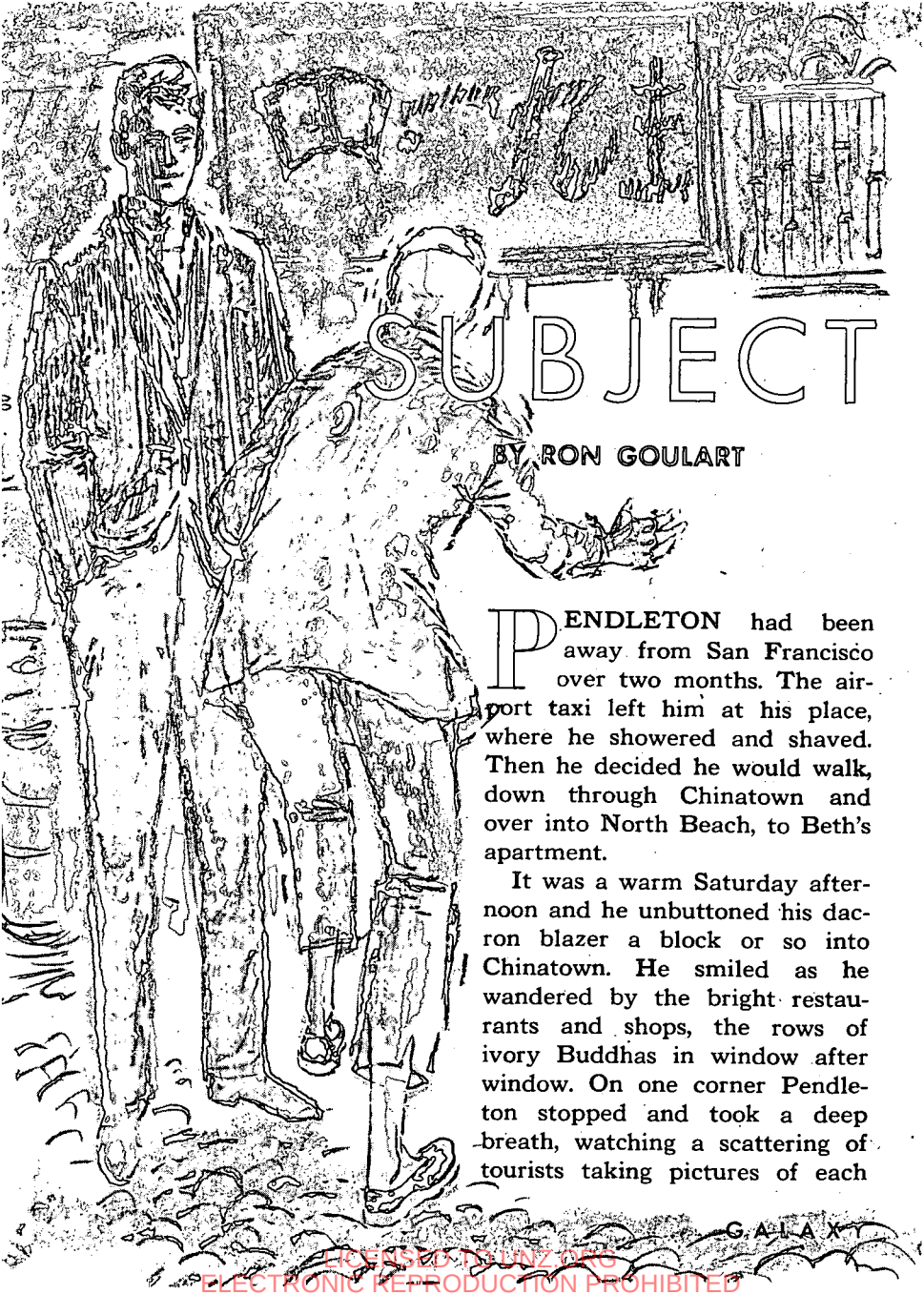

SUBJECT

BY RON GOULART

PENDLETON had been away from San Francisco over two months. The airport taxi left him at his place, where he showered and shaved. Then he decided he would walk, down through Chinatown and over into North Beach, to Beth's apartment.

It was a warm Saturday afternoon and he unbuttoned his dacron blazer a block or so into Chinatown. He smiled as he wandered by the bright restaurants and shops, the rows of ivory Buddhas in window after window. On one corner Pendleton stopped and took a deep breath, watching a scattering of tourists taking pictures of each

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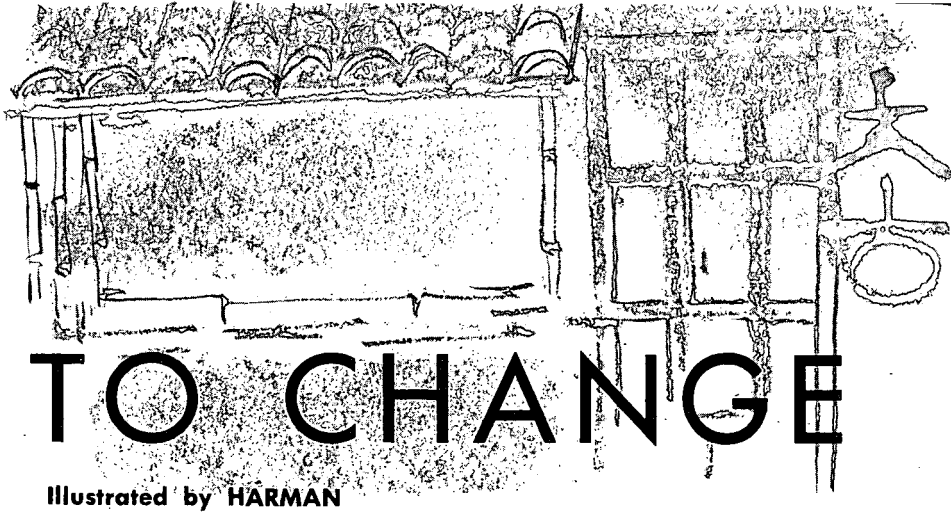

TO CHANGE

Illustrated by HARMAN

other. Someone had lost a half dozen fortune cookies on the sidewalk and they crackled and spread fragments and fortunes as people passed.

While he was waiting for a signal to change, three small Chinese boys charged a fourth who had ducked around Pendleton. They all ran around the corner and Pendleton looked after them. There was an old curio and toy shop there. He went toward its streaked window, trying to identify the objects. Some kind of procession of tin soldiers made up the main display. The door of the shop opened and an old man with a flared white beard came out. His dark suit hung loose on him and his tie was coming untied as he hurried away.

The old man brushed by Pendleton, nudging him. "Many pardons," he said, cutting across the street. He ran downhill, weaving a little, and into an alley.

The bells over the toy shop door rattled again. "Stop, thief!" shouted the fat Chinese, who came running up to Pendleton. The man shouted again and stopped on the corner, his hands on his hips, looking.

Pendleton crossed the street and turned down the alley the old man had used. This would cut off a block of the way to

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Beth's. He had kept quiet about the thief because he didn't want to get involved in a lot of delaying questioning.

HALFWAY down the alley he saw an arm dangling out of a garbage can. Pendleton blinked and approached the shadowed area around the can. He flipped the lid up and the coat sleeve that had been tangled on the can edge slipped free and dropped into the can. If the old man was wandering around naked, they shouldn't have much trouble catching him.

Pendleton liked the pre-quake apartment house Beth lived in. In almost any weather he liked to see its narrow brown wood front waiting there in the middle of the block. He smiled as a big blue-gray gull flew low overhead and then circled up and away behind Beth's building. Pendleton took the rough steps in twos and threes and swung at Beth's bell. There was a folded note for him glued on her mail box lid with Scotch tape. It told him she might be delayed a bit and to get her keys from under the rubber-plant pot on the porch and let himself in. He did that, thinking again that Beth's notes always looked as though she wrote them on horseback.

Upstairs he dropped her keys on the small mantle over the small real fireplace. Her bedroom door was slightly open. Just as he noticed this, Beth called out to him.

"I hope that's you, Ben?" she said from her room.

"Where'll I put the ice, lady?" he said. "You're supposed to be out."

"Welcome back. I just got here and I had to change so I left the keys down there in case you got here while I was changing. How was New York?"

"Okay, but I'm glad I'm with the agency out here. How'd you get in without keys?" He sat down in the soft tan sofa chair he'd given her.

"I have a key to the kitchen way. Is the show all right now?"

"I guess we fixed it for a while. How are you?"

"Fine. And, hey, I have a good part in Alex' new play. It just happened and I couldn't write."

"You have lousy handwriting, you know," Pendleton called. Grinning, he got out a cigarette and reached into his coat pocket for a book of matches. Something jabbed into the palm of his hand.

"It's because I'm so intense," Beth said, near her bedroom door.

Pendleton winced and pulled a small toy Chinese junk out of the pocket. The price stamp was

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still on the bottom of the boat, 25 cents. The old man must have dropped it in his pocket when he nudged him.

Beth came up behind him. "It's warm in here. Give me your coat. I have a whole new concept about making martinis. This fellow in Actors' Lab told me. You do it with Zen." Her hands rested on Pendleton's shoulders.

"I'll be damned," he said, rubbing his palm with the boat as he stood.

Beth slid her arms over his shoulders and locked her hands on his chest. "What's that, Ben?"

Pendleton turned around in her hold. He tapped her tanned nose with the toy boat and told her about it. "I suppose I should take it back," he said finally.

Beth laughed. "Makes you a receiver of stolen goods." She took the toy boat and walked to the fireplace. She put it next to her keys and turned to him. She was wearing a light blue dress with a flared skirt. No stockings, flat black shoes. She'd cut her blonde hair short since he'd seen her last. "Welcome back," she said, smiling.

A light wind was starting up, tapping windows with tree branches, as Pendleton let himself into Beth's darkening apartment. He flipped the light switch on and started for the tan sofa chair, jiggling the keys in his hand. The bedroom door slammed.

"You in there?" Pendleton called. Her note said she'd gone out for some forgotten groceries.

Pendleton opened the bedroom door and turned on the lights. The window beyond Beth's low, blue-covered bed was open and the wind was flapping the curtains against her dressing table. A strong flap caught a lipstick and flipped it into the thick rug.

Edging around the bed, Pendleton closed the window and picked up the lipstick. He left the bedroom door a bit open and went back to the chair. There was a paper back by Eisenstein on the coffee table and he picked that up and read down the contents page.

The wind got stronger and parts of the old building creaked, first something down under him, then something way up and to the right. Now and then there would be a bang from out in back. Pendleton dropped the book and got down on his knees in front of the fireplace and kindled a fire. As the fire took hold, bright sparks popped out into the room.

Something started tapping on the window behind Pendleton's chair. At last, in a lull between creaking and banging, he became

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aware of a tapping. He looked at the window and the early night sky. The tapping went on.

There was a gray cat sitting on the sill outside. The cat was tangled up in an orange and blue bead necklace. "Lonely out there," Pendleton said. He didn't much like cats, but this one looked sad. He opened the window and the cat jumped in, the necklace falling free and clattering against the wall. "We'll see if maybe Beth's got something around to give to wandering cats." Pendleton reached out to pick up the cat. Sputtering, the animal raked at his fingers and dived between his legs.

Pendleton spun and saw the cat scoot through the open bedroom door. "Hey, you little bastard, you'll knock over things."

He was two steps from the door when it slammed and locked. Pendleton stopped, wondering how the animal had managed to bang into the door hard enough to close it. He didn't think the cat should stay in there and anyway Beth would want to get in when she got home. He'd pick the lock. Crouching, he reached for the knob. Something clicked and the door swung in. He recognized Beth's terry robe and he looked up and saw her face, very pale.

"Okay," she said. "I guess I was too cute with the key bits. Go away, Ben, and leave me alone. Please?"

"What's the matter?" He was still squatting and her stepping forward sent him over.

"Just go away, Ben. Please, now." She brushed by him and sat in a bucket chair, putting both bare feet down hard on the floor.

Ben got himself up. "You drunk?"

BETH brushed at her hair. "I thought if you were sitting out here and I showed up in the bedroom, you'd think I came in the back way. Or that I was already in there and just hadn't heard you." She bit her thumb. "Just another trick I wanted to try."

"What are you talking about?" He bent and scooped up the bead necklace.

"Go away. That's all."

"Well, why?" He twisted the string of beads around his knuckles. "Somebody else?"

"Yes. Alex." She smiled.

"Alex? That fruiter who runs the Actors' Lab." The string broke and beads splattered away from him. Three landed in the fire.

"Or maybe my Uncle Russ. Did you know we lived with with him for three years when I was a kid and I was always having odd fevers and things? He

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had some kind of quack x-ray business."

Pendleton took Beth's shoulders. "You're sick, is that it?"

"No. Go away, Ben."

"Well, what is it?"

Beth sighed, annoyed. "You know about Method. You have to feel the parts, live them."

"Sure."

Beth shrugged her shoulders until Pendleton let go. "One weekend afternoon—oh, about two or three weeks after the agency sent you off—I was here trying to be an old lady. For an exercise at the Lab. And I was."

Pendleton blinked at her still pale fact. "That's swell, Beth. A guy likes to know what his fiancee is up to while he's away."

"I *was* an old lady." She stood with her body thrust almost against him. "See? I changed."

He backed a little. "How about a drink?"

"Don't you get it, Ben? How the hell do you think I just came in?"

"The back way." Pendleton decided to try a drink on her and then find out who her doctor was these days.

"I was the cat. Now you know about it and can go away, Ben." She let herself fall to the floor and she huddled there, crying.

"How long have you had this idea?" He knelt beside her, running one hand over her back.

"You know who put that silly damn boat in your pocket?" she asked.

"Sure. You were that little old man."

Beth rolled and sat up, her legs tangled in the robe. She took a deep breath. "Listen, Ben. I got a kick out of changing into different kinds of people. It was a help in my work at the Actors' Lab. Then I got the idea it would be fun to try other things. Animals, chairs, tables. One rainy night I was a footstool until it was time to go to bed."

"I was a tea kettle as a boy. Stop kidding."

"I don't know, Ben. It gets sort of vacant all around when you're away somewhere. I had this feeling that I wanted to see if I could just step into a store or someplace and try to swipe something. Anything."

PENDLETON found himself starting to shake. He put his arms around Beth. "That was you, then, taking junk from an old Chinese."

"I could change, you see, and take things as all sorts of odd characters. If I was spotted and followed, I'd try to duck in an alley or a doorway and change again. The clothes are extra. Sometimes I could hide clothes in a lot. Most of the time, though, I'd have to change into

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something new. A bird, a cat. Then I'd carry what I had stolen in my beak or around my neck." She laughed softly. "Once I copped an umbrella and changed into a big dog and went off with it in my mouth." She twisted slightly in his arms. "I'm sorry. It's all sort of odd and silly. I do it."

"Well, why?"

"I don't know."

"Beth?" He inched up, lifting her with him.

"Yes?" She let him sit her in the sofa chair.

"You have to go see somebody. You have to stop."

She stiffened. "If it was as simple as insanity, I would."

"Please, Beth." He wandered to the fireplace and threw in more wood.

"The stealing *does* bother me. I think the changing is good. I can use it to really go someplace in my acting career. Quit the secretary business altogether. I actually changed to an old woman for one of Alex's one-acters. He thought I'd just done a good job of makeup. I don't believe I want to simply stop, Ben."

"You have to!"

"Don't start shouting commands."

Pendleton sat across from her on the sofa. "Will you promise to start seeing somebody? Maybe I can find out about a good man. Promise you'll see him."

"You going to ask around? Why don't you do a TV spot? 'We are happy to announce that Beth Gershwin is daffy.' "

"Relax, Beth. You decide what you want to do. I won't talk to anybody."

Beth moved to the window. The wind had died. "I don't know, Ben."

"Let it rest. Let's have the drink." He came to her side.

"I think I'd like to be alone for a while."

"I'd like to stay."

"I'd like you to go. Please."

"Beth."

"Go on, Ben." She stared at him, then walked into her bedroom.

She didn't close the door and he followed.

Her robe was spread-eagled on the bed. Pendleton looked around the room. Before, there had been one carved stool at the vanity table. Now there were two.

Pendleton left the apartment and ran down the hall, taking short, shallow breaths. But he couldn't just leave her. He bit his lip and went back through the still open door.

"Come on, Beth. Don't be stubborn," he said into the bedroom, watching the two stools.

He waited an hour. Then he turned off the lights and started

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to leave. Going out this time, he stepped on one of the wooden beads and almost fell onto the coffee table.

Pendleton slammed Beth's door and went out into the clear night. If she could be stubborn, so could he.

IT WAS almost two weeks before she called him to apologize. She'd got him at the agency. He didn't stay in his apartment much. He kept talking to himself if he did.

You could see the street from the little Italian restaurant they'd agreed to meet in. Pendleton sat at a round table close to the wide window and watched for Beth. There was a slight haze in the afternoon air and most of the secretaries that passed were coatless.

Beth started smiling a quarter of a block from him. She was in a light cotton dress, weaving in and out of the noontime pedestrians.

"Nice day," Pendleton said, standing.

Beth smiled and sat down. "I noticed that right off."

They ordered and Pendleton said, "How've you been?"

"Great." She clasped her hands together on the checkered table top. "You were right, Ben. I'm sorry I was mean."

Pendleton moved his glass of water three inches. "Good."

"I've started seeing a very highly recommended analyst. Things are starting to look up. I haven't even had an impulse to filch anything in days."

The food arrived. "It'll take time."

"I have a great part in Alex's next play. It's really a challenge. By Ionesco. Being able to change will help."

Pendleton set his fork down. "Huh?"

"I tried changing into the character last night. It came off fine."

"What are you seeing a psychiatrist for, then?" he asked, his voice low.

"So I won't steal things any more."

He held the edge of the table for a minute, not meeting her eyes. Finally he said, "I see. Well, that's fine, Beth. How've things been at work?"

Beth grinned and told him.

THE DAYS were turning cool and the trees had started scattering dry leaves into the wind. On a sharp weekend afternoon Pendleton was killing time in the produce district before driving over to Beth's.

There was a coffee shop open and Pendleton thought about crossing over for a cup of coffee. The whitewashed door of the

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place shot open and a fat woman with an orange-fringed shawl came out. She was carrying something wrapped up in a paper napkin. She glanced at Pendleton, hesitated a second and then went running off toward a closed warehouse. By the time she reached it, the short-order cook was on the street looking after her. He threw a gesture after her and went back inside.

Pendleton shivered once slightly. He started walking for his car and a block from it he found himself running. He got to Beth's place ahead of the approaching dusk.

The downstairs door wasn't locked, but Beth's apartment door didn't open when he tried it. Pendleton grunted, slapping his pockets for something to pick the lock with.

The door opened. Beth, in capris and a striped sweater, looked out at him, her head tilted slightly to one side. "Did I hear applause? You're early."

"You know why I'm here early." He pushed into the room. "I thought you were better. What the hell were you doing down there?"

"Where? What's the matter?" She backed across the rug to the fireplace. A small fire was going and she turned to warm her hands at it.

"I just saw you steal something from that diner. Silverware maybe. You want me to search the place?"

Facing him, her lips hardly parted, Beth said, "I should think you would trust me, being we love each other and all. I was rehearsing until a half hour ago and Alex dropped me off. I've been here since then."

Pendleton's hands fell to his sides. "Well, nothing I guess is wrong. I'm just jumpy. This changing thing bothers me."

Beth reached out and patted his arm. "It's okay, Ben?"

"Yeah." He sat down in the tan chair and looked up at her.

"Want to eat here tonight, by the fire? I'll have the Flying Something deliver food."

"Good. And send out for a bottle or two."

Beth bent and kissed him. "Trust me again?"

He brushed at her hair and nodded.

PENDLETON dropped too much wood into the fireplace and a stick snapped out onto the rug. He gingerly picked up the stick and poked it back into the flames. He went back to the low sofa Beth was on. He found his glass in the dark and refilled it from the pitcher.

Beth reached out with one bare foot and stroked the side of

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his head. She had put on a dark blue dress with several stiff lace petticoats and whenever he tried to touch her she made crackling sounds.

"You're really a nice fellow," Beth said, finding his ear with her toe.

"So are you," he said, finishing his drink.

"Maybe we should go ahead and get married."

Ben agreed and poured fresh drinks.

"Ben?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry." She was crying.

"What is it?"

"It *was* me this afternoon. I *have* been doing those things. I never went to any highly recommended man at all."

Pendleton felt tolerant. "So what? Things will work out somehow."

BETH sat up. "I can't stop it, Ben."

Pendleton thought he heard an odd quaver in her voice. "You're not onstage now, kid. Save the phony touches."

Her leg swung round, just missing his head, and she stood up. "That's your trouble. You're totally incapable of comprehending."

"I comprehend you. You're loony and a liar."

Beth slapped him. "It'll be simpler if I stop being me!"

Pendleton had somehow gotten his arm stuck under the sofa. "Take it easy."

He was aware of a rustling sound and when he got loose and came up he saw Beth naked by the window for an instant. As he looked she changed. Then there were two tan sofa chairs in the room.

Pendleton called Beth's name over and over, but she wouldn't come back. It got cold in the apartment after a time and he threw all the wood he could find in the fire. He crawled over to the martini pitcher and drank from it. He noticed that some sticks had fallen out and landed in the tangle of petticoats Beth had left and he smiled at the disorder of everything and put his head back against the sofa.

Petticoats crackling woke him. Even before he got his head up very high in the room, he was coughing. The room was turning bright, sparkling orange.

"Beth!" he said. "Beth!"

There were still the two tan sofa chairs.

"Beth, sober up now! Come on, change! We've got to get out!"

Nothing happened. Pendleton looked at the chairs a moment. The one on the left. He grabbed it up and wavered to the apartment door. To make sure, he'd

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have to come up for the other one.

For several minutes it seemed the chair would stay wedged in the doorway. It came free finally and he went back with it and tumbled and twisted down the stairs.

A SIREN met him in the cold night outside. The engines were already there. The firemen were heading for the building.

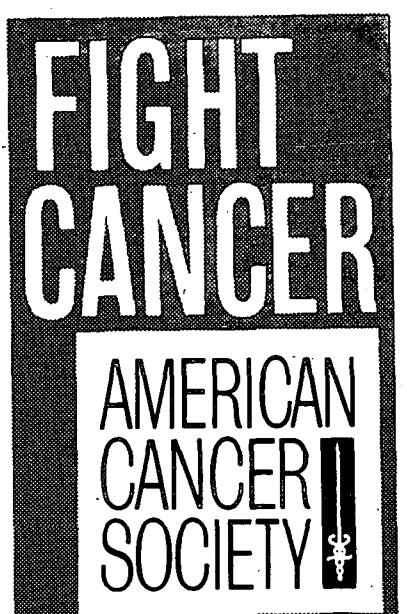
Spray fell back across the street where Pendleton took the chair. "Beth, please," he said in a low voice. "Change now." He tried to go get the other chair, to be sure, but they wouldn't let him.

He fell into the one he'd picked and began crying softly. The sirens stopped. Before he let the ambulance people look at him, he insisted that the chair be looked after.

No trace of Beth was found and Pendleton couldn't explain what had happened. After they let him go, he had the chair sent to his apartment.

He put it very carefully in the living room by the liquor cabinet and sat down near it to wait.

— RON GOULART



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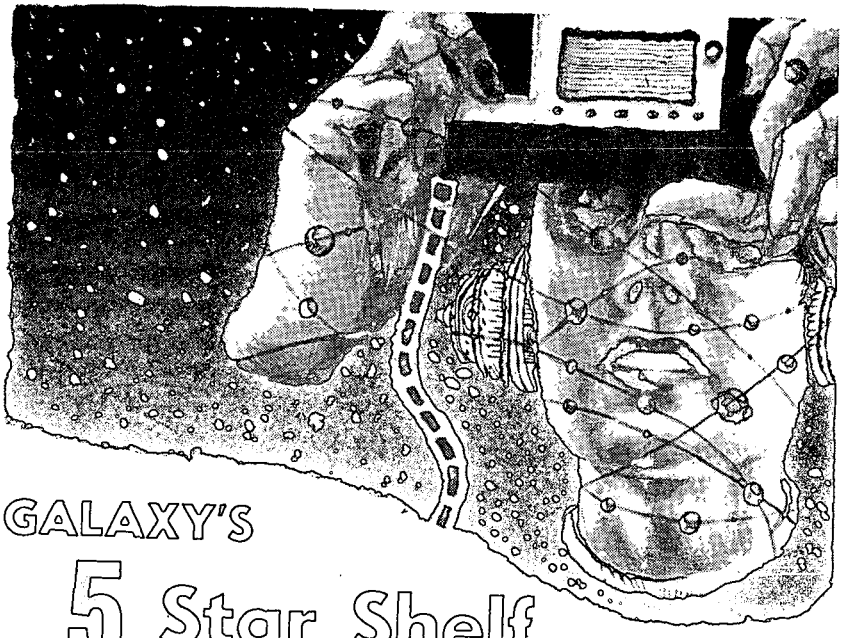

GALAXY'S 5 Star Shelf

THE MENACE FROM EARTH by Robert A. Heinlein. Gnome Press, Hicksville, N. Y., $3.50

THE TROUBLE with Heinlein is that once he explores a situation, not much is left to be said. His prototypes are up-to-the-minute masterworks.

Take, for example, the famous time travel paradox, "By His Bootstraps." In 18 years I haven't seen its equal. Likewise for the frightening classic from GALAXY, "Year of the Jackpot." Ditto again for the 1942 "Goldfish Bowl."

Of the more recent items, a startler is the tongue-in-cheek *Ladies-Home-Journal*-type approach of "The Menace from Earth," set in a wildly imaginative alien environment.

The minor stories pull down the batting average, but only a little.

Rating: ****½

NEW MAPS OF HELL by Kingsley Amis. Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York, $3.95

KINGSLEY AMIS, author of several successful mainstream

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novels, is sufficiently renowned to be used in N.Y. *Times* crossword puzzles. In 1958-59, while visiting lecturer at Princeton, he delivered a series of talks for Seminars in Criticism from which most of this book is taken.

Whereas most serious studies of science fiction notoriously are written by critics with neither background nor liking for the field, Amis is a longtime reader, though not writer, of it.

A well-known author with a very considerable knowledge of the field — shouldn't one expect his influence to be beneficial?

Regrettably, it isn't. Amis has read science fiction long enough to specialize, to narrow his interests remorselessly.

"Nasty" is his thematic word — it appears just about everywhere throughout the book — and his title buttons up the tank he would like to make of science fiction to bust through mainstream literature (which he says bites off less than it can chew) and civilization (which he wants this field to criticize, and, he stresses, sharply), among other prime but purely personal targets.

In short, Amis demands sociological science fiction and, it seems clear, nothing else. As a reader, he could easily restrict his choices to that. As an influence on the field, however, his restrictions would be deadly constrictions.

THE LITTLE MEN by Joseph E. Kelleam. Avalon Books, N.Y., $2.95

THE LITTLE Men and the Brons, normal-sized descendants of a 25,000-year-old emergency landing on Earth, inhabit a gigantic cavern extending under half the U. S. According to Kelleam, we're the peace-disturbing upstairs neighbors, our noisy atom bomb parties draining energy from their pint-sized sun.

A hothead member of a secret mission of undergrounders kills our Chief of Staff and Dr. Jack Odin, prophetic name, becomes a modern Dr. Mudd by treating the assassin's wounds. Brought back to the underworld paradise by Princess Maya, a dish, he embraces their cause (and her).

A slight, frothy adventure pegged solely for entertainment, it comes reasonably close to its mark.

Rating: ***

THE ARMCHAIR SCIENCE READER edited by Isabel S. Gordon and Sophie Sorkin. Simon and Schuster, N.Y., $7.95

THIS GIANT has everything except pictures: stories, facts, fantasy, poetry, plays, biography. The common denominator is science and everything of interest

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goes, from excerpts of Newton's correspondence with the Royal Society to Percy Shelley; from Benét's "By the Waters of Babylon" to Sidney Howard's "Yellow Jack;" from the Book of Job to Richard E. Byrd alone in the Antarctic.

This is that rare book into which one can dip with reward again, again and yet again.

THE BEST FROM FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, NINTH SERIES, edited by Robert P. Mills. Doubleday and Co., N.Y., $3.95

THIS FIRST anthology under new direction sticks to the trail set by its predecessors. There are such superior items as Daniel Keyes' "Flowers for Algernon," Heinlein's "All You Zombies," Damon Knight's "What Rough Beast" and Bester's "The Pi Man." However, there are also the Ferdinand Feghoot things and "Invasion of the Planet of Love," another example of humor delicately applied with a shovel.

Despite these, the overall quality is high.

Rating: ****

IS THERE INTELLIGENT LIFE ON EARTH? by Alan Dunn. Simon & Schuster, N.Y., $3.50

DUNN'S PARAPHRASE of a frequent speculation on other planets is more than funny.

Though this is ostensibly an account of a fact-finding expedition from Mars to Earth to answer the above question, Dunn actually needs no alien viewpoint to point up the screwiness of human behavior.

His cartoon and text format is a delight just to look and laugh at — but don't take it personally.

MATHEMATICS IN EVERYDAY THINGS by William C. Vergara. Harper & Bros., N.Y., $3.95

VERGARA ADOPTS the same apparently haphazard question and answer format that he used in his highly successful *Science in Everyday Things.* The prime difference is that his present book presupposes an acquaintance by the reader with high school math.

Some conversation-piece excerpts: Possible baseball lineups, excluding pitchers, 259,459,200; with only 24 friends, the possibility of any two having identical birthdays is *better than even;* the chances are 500 to 1 against drawing a flush. Fun aside, though, there's plenty of useful information in text and added tables.

SF:59, edited by Judith Merril.

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Gnome Press, Hicksville, $3.50
EITHER PICKINGS were leaner than in past years or else Editor Merril gleaned instead of digging.

There are a handful of fine yarns: "The Prize of Peril" by Sheckley, Phillips' "The Yellow Pill," Davidson's "Or All the Seas with Oysters." Most of the remainder are of average interest and the fact articles still do not belong.

Rating: ***

THE PEACEMAKERS by Curtis W. Casewit. Avalon Books, N.Y., $2.95
AN EX-ARMY sergeant seizes control of one of the last two sanctuaries left after WW III. His agents comb the rubble of the world for scientists, professional men and soldiers. Little do they suspect that he will make them develop weapons to conquer what's left of the world. Creaking plot aside, a tangled jungle of colons, semicolons and mixed metaphors also conspires to trip the unwary reader.

"He left the purges to Dolusi, the arrests, the disappearances; he couldn't be bothered; he had merely asked for extreme care with scientists: the backbone of his new army."

And, "Dolusi let a smile drip toward the scientist."

Rating: **

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NEW DIMENSIONS OF FLIGHT by Lewis Zarem. E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., N.Y., $4.50
THE PROFUSION of photographs is the book's strong point. Here are page after page of beautiful, needle-pointed aircraft; slim, graceful short-range missiles; impressively powerful ICBMs.

The text is for teenagers and up. The pictures would interest any age.

PRISMS AND LENSES by Jerome S. Meyer. World Publishing Co., Cleveland, $2.50
DESPITE THE fact that the prototype was right in front of each eye, man's invention of the lens took thousands of years. Meyer's concisely written book explains the mechanics of lenses and prisms and their numerous uses. Obviously, astronomy would be hamstrung without the lens, but few laymen appreciate the enormous value of the prismatic tools in star work.

FUN WITH THE SUN by D. S. Halacy, Jr. The Macmillan Co., N.Y., $2.75
THE ENERGY squandered by the sun on only the backwaters of Boulder Dam is greater than that developed by the mighty generators! Halacy's How-To

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book contains seven projects designed to capitalize on some of that wasted free power: a solar furnace, radio, water heater, oven, motor, reflector cooker and still. Practical? My family successfully constructed a solar radio from his plans.

MENACE FROM THE MOON by Hugh Walters. Criterion Books, N.Y., $3.50

THE SEQUEL to *Blastoff at 0300* is as carefully and realistically detailed as its predecessor. The same cast of characters enlivens its pages, except for the cold-fish director of the international effort to eliminate strange domes on the moon. These alien structures, bombarding Earth with neutrons, cause atomic piles to reach critical activity as well as increase the incidence of anemia and mental disorders.

Young Chris Godfrey is called on in the crisis as the only human qualified to ride the rocket that will eject a beacon pinpointing the domes and homing a swarm of atomic warheads for their destruction.

Walters writes a taut, tense and human yarn that will appeal to the young reader — and skillfully leaves room for a sequel.

Rating: ****

LOST RACE OF MARS by Robert Silverberg. The John C. Winston Co., Inc., Phila., $2.95

A STRAIGHTFORWARD yarn, told without frills and without too many chills.

Sally and Jim's biologist father takes his family along when given a one-year research grant on Mars. Earth's only colony struggles for existence beneath a huge plastic dome and antagonism toward the nonproductive family runs high. Sally and Jim, hoping for a measure of prestige, search the desert for the fabled Lost Race.

Rating: ***

THE TERRIBLE CHURNADRYNE by Eleanor Cameron. Little, Brown & Co., Boston, $3.00

MRS. CAMERON'S latest for 8-12-year-olds is qualitatively comparable to her delightful Mushroom Planet series. A mystery, its reliance is primarily on suspense, rather than on the fetching whimsy of its forerunners.

The Churnadryne, dimly seen by young Tom and his sister Jennifer, appears to be a local sea monster, although the other inhabitants of the California coastal town laughingly disagree. The children's efforts to prove their fish story true make up the tale.

Rating for youngsters: ****

— FLOYD C. GALE

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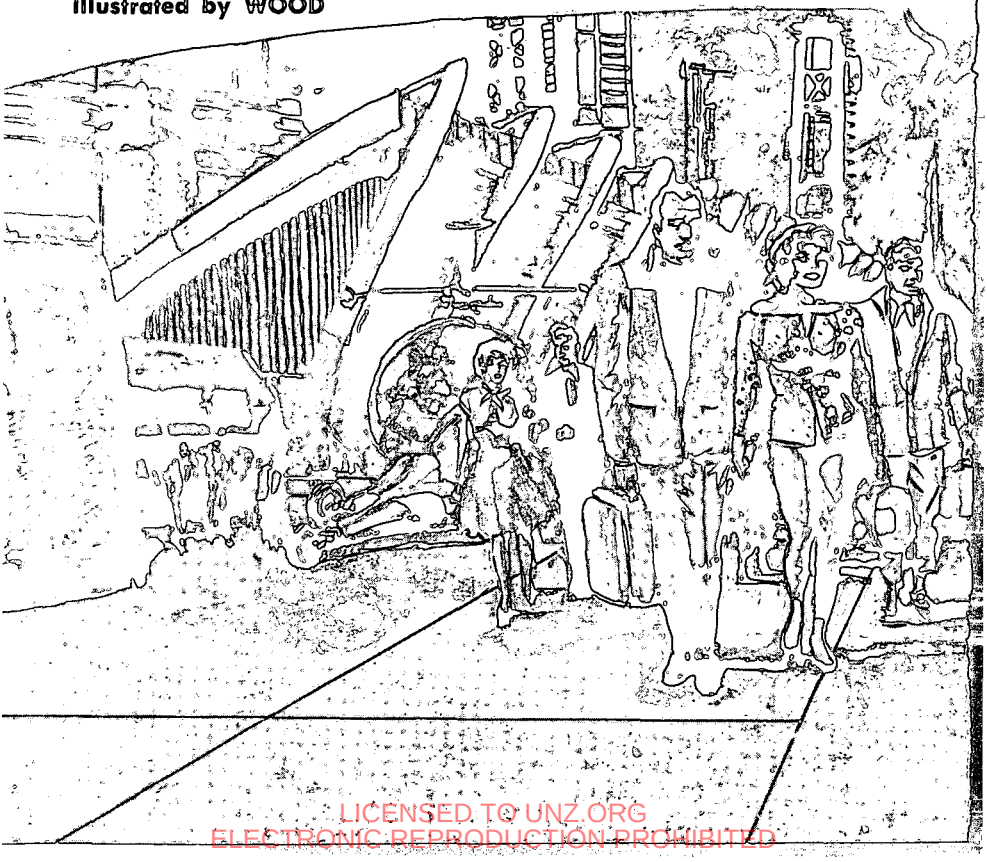
ROUND-AND-ROUND TRIP

All he wanted to do was go

By H. B. FYFE

Illustrated by WOOD

WHEN the passengers from Epseri II had been chauffered from the *Centaur Queen* to the administration building of the spaceport, the man whose papers identified him as Robert L. Winstead trailed the others to the Insterstellar Travel Agency counter. His taking an unobtrusive place near the



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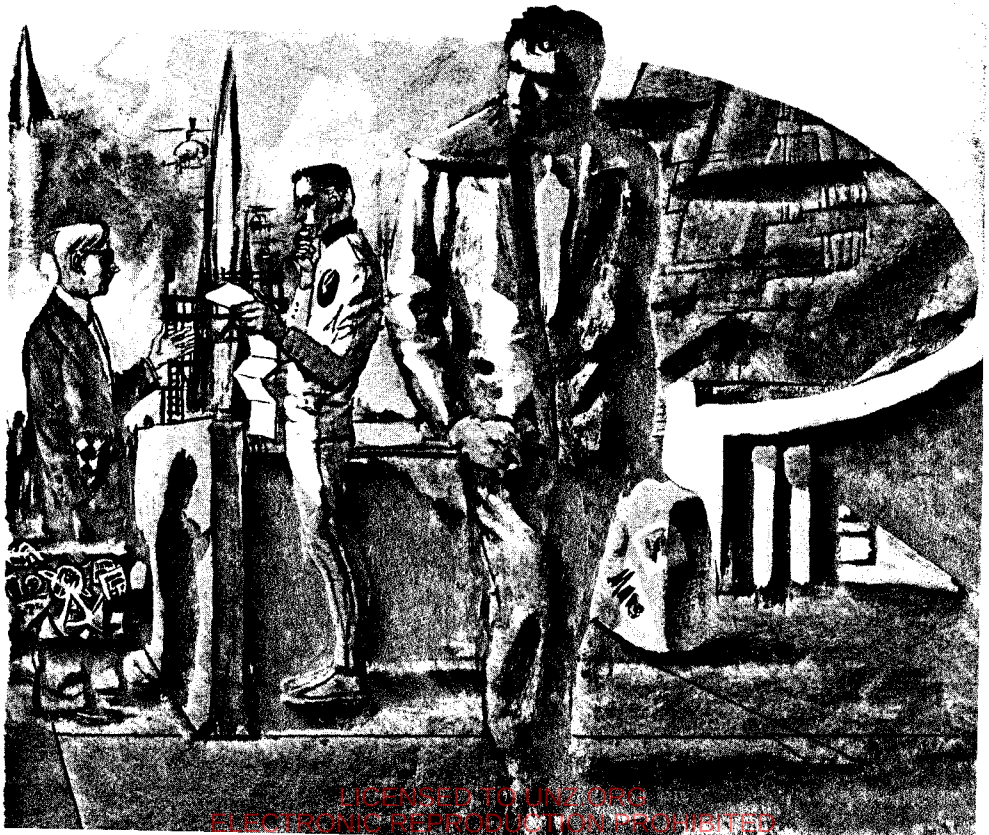
from here to there — but somehow the entire Milky Way had been converted into a squirrel cage.

end of the line was entirely in keeping with his unobtrusive appearance.

Of medium height but somewhat underweight, Winstead looked like a tired clerk who had not slept well in space. The wide trousers of his conservative maroon suit flapped about his thin shins and drew attention to the fact that he had donned one blue and one green sock.

The processing was rapid; most of the two dozen passengers meant to stay here on St. Andrew V. Only a few, of whom Winstead was one, carried "ultimate destination" tickets. They remained after the locals had been taken in charge by a guide who



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would see them into the adjacent city.

Winstead finally reached a clerk, a dark, extremely brisk young man. He presented his papers. The young man riffled through them, stamped the date of arrival on the travel record according to both local and Terran calendar, then turned back abruptly to the card showing Winstead's destination. He shook his head in puzzled annoyance.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. — uh — Winstead. Is this the proper ticket you've given me? Could you have gotten it mixed up with someone else's?"

The traveler coughed and spluttered worried, questioning noises. A look of vague alarm spread over his undistinguished features.

His wispy gray hair had become rumpled when he had pulled off and stuffed into a side pocket his rather sporty maroon-and-white checked cap. This, plus the fact that he had to look up to the clerk, lent him an air of the typical little man in the wrong queue. It did not help that he wore old-fashioned sunglasses instead of colored contacts, and had forgotten to remove them before peering at the ticket.

"Why — er — yes, yes, this is right," he said. "See, here's my name on it."

THE clerk sighed as he looked around, but his partner was busy. "Someone seems to have blown a nova, sir," he condescended to explain. "It says here your ultimate destination is Altair IV."

"Quite right, quite right," said Winstead. "Going out there to see what the sales possibilities are for —"

"And they sent you *here* from Epseri? That can't be, sir."

"But — they told me — don't you Agency people take care of picking out the routes?"

"Yes, sir, of course. Beyond the local Terran sphere of travel, there are very few scheduled flights and most of them are for important cargo. That's why your ticket simply shows your ultimate destination, and that's why the Interstellar Travel Agency was developed — to arrange for the traveler's progress by stages."

"Yes," said Winstead. "That is how they explained it to me."

The clerk met his worried gaze for a few moments before shaking himself slightly. He prodded the ticket on the counter between him and Winstead with a disdainful forefinger.

"Let me put it as simply as possible, Mr. — uh — Winstead," he said very patiently. "Somebody at your last stop sent you in the wrong direction."

"But — but — you just said

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it went by stages. I realize I can't go in a direct line. It depends on whether you can find me the right ship, doesn't it?"

The young man glanced about once more for help, but none was available.

"We'll see what we can do," he said, examining the ticket sourly. He thumbed a button to roll out a length of note paper from a slot in the counter top and scribbled upon it with his lectropen. "Now, if you will please accompany that young lady to the Agency hotel with those other travelers, we will notify you the moment a desirable ship is scheduled to leave."

Winstead thanked him gratefully and turned away to locate his baggage. Under the conditions imposed by space travel, only the barest minimum was permitted. Even so, some little time was required to find his bag — an unlikely occurrence that the clerk accepted with a resigned air.

Finally, with the half dozen who also would be traveling onward, Winstead was off to the hotel and a day's rest.

As a matter of fact, it was three days' rest, before he was summoned. He was, perhaps by intent, confronted upon his arrival by a different clerk, a solid, square-faced girl. Winstead's nervous questions were reflected unanswered from a shield of impervious calm. He received all the information the Agency seemed to feel was good for him and was sent out with a personal guide.

The guide delivered him to a thick thing named the *Stellar Streak,* clearly a workhorse freighter. Somehow, it never did become plain to Winstead until after he had emerged from his acceleration net that the destination was Topaz IV.

"But, Captain!" he protested. "Are you sure the people at the spaceport have not made some mistake? That is more or less the direction I came from."

The pilot stared impatiently at the papers thrust under his nose.

"Can't say, sir. We have our work cut out just to take the ship to where they tell us. Only reason we carry passengers is that regulations require cooperation with the Agency. Don't believe in it myself."

MR. WINSTEAD sighed and returned to his quarters. At least, on this ship, he still had a private compartment in which to float his net. There was even a chair, equipped with a safety belt and folding table, bolted to the deck. What he did miss was the general dining saloon of the liner he had taken from Epseri II.

Still, he reflected, *travel can't always be luxurious.*

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He spent some time, after the ship had slipped into stellar drive, in unpacking his one small suitcase. He found that he had to take his shaver to the general head to plug it in, but otherwise got along comfortably enough. One or two of the crew who shared his turn at the galley counter, in fact, took him for an old space hopper and began to exchange yarns.

This sort of semi-suspended living passed the four-day hop to the Topaz system and the extra day necessary for planetary approach. When they landed, Winstead was the only passenger, either incoming or outgoing, to show up at the cargo shed designated as the spaceport administration building.

Here on Topaz IV, the Agency clerk was a part-time man who had to be called from the mines on the far side of the city. He arrived to find Winstead dozing on a cot at the end of the shed.

"Billy Callahan," he introduced himself. "They say you're not for the mines."

"That is correct," answered Winstead, stretching a kink out of his back. "I have my destination here in these papers . . . if you will bear with me a moment. . ."

He fumbled out his identification, travel record, and ticket. Callahan, rubbing his carroty hair with a large, freckled hand, pored over them. A few minutes of searching through the battered desk that was his headquarters revealed the official arrival stamp. Its inky smear was duly added to the record.

"Now for your way outa here," grunted Callahan. "Meanwhile, how about a cigar, Mr. Winstead?"

"Why — thanks very much."

Winstead regarded the torpedo doubtfully. He wondered upon which planet the tobacco for it — if it was tobacco — had been grown.

"This might take a little while," said Callahan, applying to the ends of their cigars a lighter that could have welded I-beams. "It ain't every day we get a through traveler here. I gotta look up the Galatlas an' the shipping notices."

He hoisted a bulky catalogue from a side table onto his desk and blew off a cloud of dust. Winstead seized the excuse to cough out a lungful of smoke. His host reached out for the ticket.

"Ultimate destination Fomalhaut VIII," he read off. "Say! That ain't one I ever had to handle before!"

He leafed through the volume for some minutes, reexamined the ticket, then dug into two or three appendices. He tapped a knobby knuckle against his chin.

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"It don't look to me, Mr. Winstead," he said thoughtfully, "like you shoulda wound up here at all. Fomalhaut VIII! That's a hell of a way from here!"

"The clerk at the last spaceport *did* seem to think there had been a mistake," Winstead volunteered cautiously.

"Somethin' sure slipped. Maybe some jet-head read his directions wrong an' sent you so many degrees Sol north instead of Sol south. Best you can say is you're still on the right general side of the Solar System."

"Oh, dear!" Winstead said, flustered. "What can you do about that?"

"Depends what ships, if any, are due here. If I was you, I'd take the first one out. Get to a bigger settlement, where you'll get a better choice of ships."

HE FLICKED ash from his cigar and inquired whether Winstead had retained quarters aboard the *Stellar Streak*. He was undaunted by the negative reply.

"Never mind," he said heartily. "We're too small to have an Agency hotel here, but I'll fix you up a place to stay in town."

They left Winstead's bag under the desk and set off by dilapidated groundcar for Topaz City. This turned out to be a crude, sprawling village of adobe walls and corrugated plastic roofs. The varied colors of the roofs contrasted in desperate gaiety with the dun walls. As soon as Callahan skidded to a halt, the car was enveloped by its own dust cloud.

"Phew!" coughed Callahan. "Some day they're gonna have to pave the street!"

Winstead pulled out a handkerchief to mop his tear-flooded eyes. His thin chest heaved and he spat out muddy saliva.

"I'm sorry about that," apologized Callahan. "Tell you what — we don't have much civilization yet, but we do have a little cocktail lounge. Come along an' I'll get you somethin' to clear your throat."

The traveler allowed himself to be helped out of the car and guided along the "street" to a low building marked by a small parking jam. Most of the men and women that passed them on the way shouted out a greeting to his companion. They dressed with little distinction between the sexes in rough shirts, boots, and pants of a narrower pattern than Winstead's conservative suit. He was introduced to six or seven people he never expected to lay eyes upon again.

Frontier culture, he deduced. *Where humans are rare, each one counts for more.*

The first thing he saw in the

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lounge was the girl guitarist. She was the only woman he had yet seen who was not wearing pants. In fact, it had hardly occurred to him that there might be someone in town who was not connected with the mines. This girl was hardly connected to her own brief costume.

The second thing he saw was a wall of friendly, weather-beaten faces, turning his way in response to Callahan's cheerful whoop. The third was a man-size drink somebody thrust at him.

After listening for quite a while to a repertoire of apparently ribald songs, most of them too local in humor for Winstead to follow, the traveler was led by Callahan to a sort of restaurant just down the street.

Winstead thought later that he had eaten something there, but what it might have been he forgot as soon as they returned to the cocktail lounge, for a bottle-swinging brawl broke out almost immediately in a far corner. After a form of order had been restored, there was a girl who danced; and presently Callahan was shaking him up and down on a spine-stiffening bed in a small, darkened room.

Winstead promptly discovered that he had, indeed, eaten. When he recovered, he followed Callahan out on wobbly legs to seek a remedy. It was a bright, sunny day, but he could not even guess at the local time. A little while after they had been successful in finding the remedy, he forgot about it.

"Take care of Bobby Winstead for me a little while, George," he heard Callahan say to someone. "I gotta stop out at the port to check a ship for him. Be right back."

THE hospitality shown him shamed Winstead into inquiring where he might cash a traveler's check. With the proceeds, he was permitted to buy about one round in a dozen, and to join in the singing. He was eagerly pumped between stops along the street for the latest news of Terra. His least little knowledge was of interest to those he encountered.

At one point, he came to himself in the midst of drawing a current dress design on the bar for one of the girls. Callahan, whose return he had missed, dissuaded the lady from taking his charge home with her as a gesture of pure gratitude. He declared that Winstead had just enough time for a nap.

Winstead's next awakening was in the echo of a terrified scream.

A light was turned on and he discovered that the man-eating vine which had been strangling

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him was in reality an acceleration net. The face that floated before him was clean-shaven and anxious.

With considerable mental effort, Winstead deduced that the face was inquiring as to his health.

"Quite . . . fine . . . thank . . . you," he answered with difficulty. "Haven't we met somewhere?"

"Sure! Last week, Mr. Winstead, when we took you to Topaz IV," said the face.

Winstead tried shaking his head. It did not hurt — very much — but he felt that his thinking was terribly slow. Then things began to click. He recognized the man as the second pilot of the *Stellar Queen.* It might have been easier had the spacer not been standing upside down to Winstead's twisted position.

He groped dizzily for a question that would not make him sound a complete idiot. The pilot saved him.

"Callahan, back on Topaz IV," he volunteered, "asked us to tell you the best routing he could figure was to go on with us to Queen Bess III. It's a busy spaceport, so he thinks you can make better connections."

"Oh. I . . . see," murmured Winstead.

Unzipping the opening of his net, he floated himself out gingerly.

"I hope it's all right, Mr. Winstead," said the spacer. "I know you went in there on an Altair IV destination, but old Callahan seemed to think he was sending you to Fomalhaut VIII. To tell the truth, I think he was a little over-fueled."

"I . . . didn't notice," said Winstead. "Tell me — how long were you down at Topaz?"

"Three days," the spacer told him. "They sure took a liking to you there, Mr. Winstead. A big crowd brought you out to the spaceport with Callahan. We found your bag under his desk by ourselves, but I don't know where you got that orange suit."

Winstead looked down at his clothing for the first time and flinched.

"But that was yesterday," continued the pilot. "You ought to be feeling like some chow by now, eh? Hey wait — the door is down here, Mr. Winstead!"

In six days, including one of landing maneuvers, they reached Queen Bess III, a very Terran world that was a minor crossroads of space travel.

Here, Winstead bade farewell to the *Stellar Queen.* His first stop was the communications office. He left a message to be transmitted to Callahan on Topaz IV by "fastest means" — *i. e.,* by the next spaceship headed that way. He said, simply, "Thanks for everything."

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HE FOUND a good many travelers wandering about the clean, beautifully furnished waiting room of the Agency here. Winstead sank into a softly upholstered armchair, opened his bag, and began to sort out his papers. No sooner did he look up from this task than there appeared before him a pleasantly smiling, gray-haired man. He was about Winstead's height, but chunky and full of bounce.

"My name is John Aubrey," he announced. "I trust I can be of service. Are you stopping here on Bessie?"

"No, I — I'm just passing through," said Winstead. "I assume you are the Agency official here?"

"One of them," Aubrey said. "Ah, your papers? Thank you. We can just step this way into my office if you like."

He threaded his way between chairs, tables, and occasional travelers to one of a row of offices. It was the size of a large closet, but cheerfully decorated. Aubrey gave Winstead a chair and sat himself down behind an extremely modern desk to commit the required formalities upon the traveler's papers. The ultimate destination ticket Winstead had included gave him pause.

"Well, well, well!" he exclaimed. "Achernar X! Really! You must be with the government, I suppose? Or a scientist? As I recall, Achernar is rather blue for human use, except our research outpost there, isn't it?"

"I — er — I am engaged in a little research," said Winstead. "You did very well to remember the place offhand."

"It *is* a long way out. Interesting. I wonder how I can get you there. Someone seems to have sent you — well, no matter. Just leave it to me. You'll be staying at our hotel, of course? Might as well, since you have paid for the service, eh? I'll have you flown over right away."

An aircar carried Winstead to the roof of a hotel overlooking a considerable metropolis. Having left his bag in his room, he found his way to the hotel department store and ordered another suit. He spent the rest of the afternoon sightseeing and decided that he might just as well have been on Terra. When he sat down to an excellent dinner that evening, he discovered that his appetite, unfortunately, had not recovered from his stay on Topaz IV.

He was awakened before dawn by the soft chime of his bedside screen. A touch of the button brought on the happy features of Aubrey.

Does he never rest? thought Winstead.

He pushed the audio button and answered.

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"Good morning, Mr. Winstead," said the Agency man brightly. "Sorry to call so early, but I was extremely lucky to find you a passage toward Achernar."

"Not sure I want to go," Winstead muttered into his pillow.

Aubrey, apparently not hearing him, bubbled merrily on. There would be an aircar on the hotel roof for Winstead in half an hour. Haste was necessary because the ship was leaving from a spaceport fifty miles outside the city. Indeed, Winstead could count himself fortunate to have had the chance so quickly. Aubrey had found it only by checking all the private spacelines. After all, Achernar was a long way off.

Winstead thanked him blearily before switching off. He then dialed the hotel store, but got no more answer than he expected. Giving up thoughts of his new suit, he rose and struggled into his clothes.

QUEEN BESS had not yet poked her corona above the horizon when the aircar delivered him to a little island spaceport south of the city. A stocky, taciturn shadow met him. They walked silently out to a ship that towered darkly overhead.

"No inside elevator?" asked Winstead, peering at the skeleton framework rising beside the ship.

"Too much load."

They rode a creaking platform up through the chilly breeze until Winstead thought they would go past the nose of the monster. Clutching his bag in one hand and the single railing in the other, he edged across a narrow gangway to an airlock. Inside, he followed the crewman down a short, three-foot-diameter shaft to a square chamber, catching his bag on the ladder no more than a few times.

In the more adequate light here, the spacer was revealed as a swarthy man with a muscular, dark-stubbled face. He wore tight trousers and shirt of navy blue and a knit cap that might once have been white. With a preoccupied air, he pulled open a small door on the bulkhead at chest level.

"Let's have your bag," he said.

Winstead handed it over. The spacer shoved it into what seemed to be a spacious compartment in spite of the yard-square door.

"Now you," he said. "I'll give you a hand up."

"Up where?" asked Winstead innocently.

"In there. That's your acceleration compartment. Plenty of room. Armored, air-conditioned, has its own emergency rations of air and water."

Winstead stooped to peer into the opening. It was deeper than

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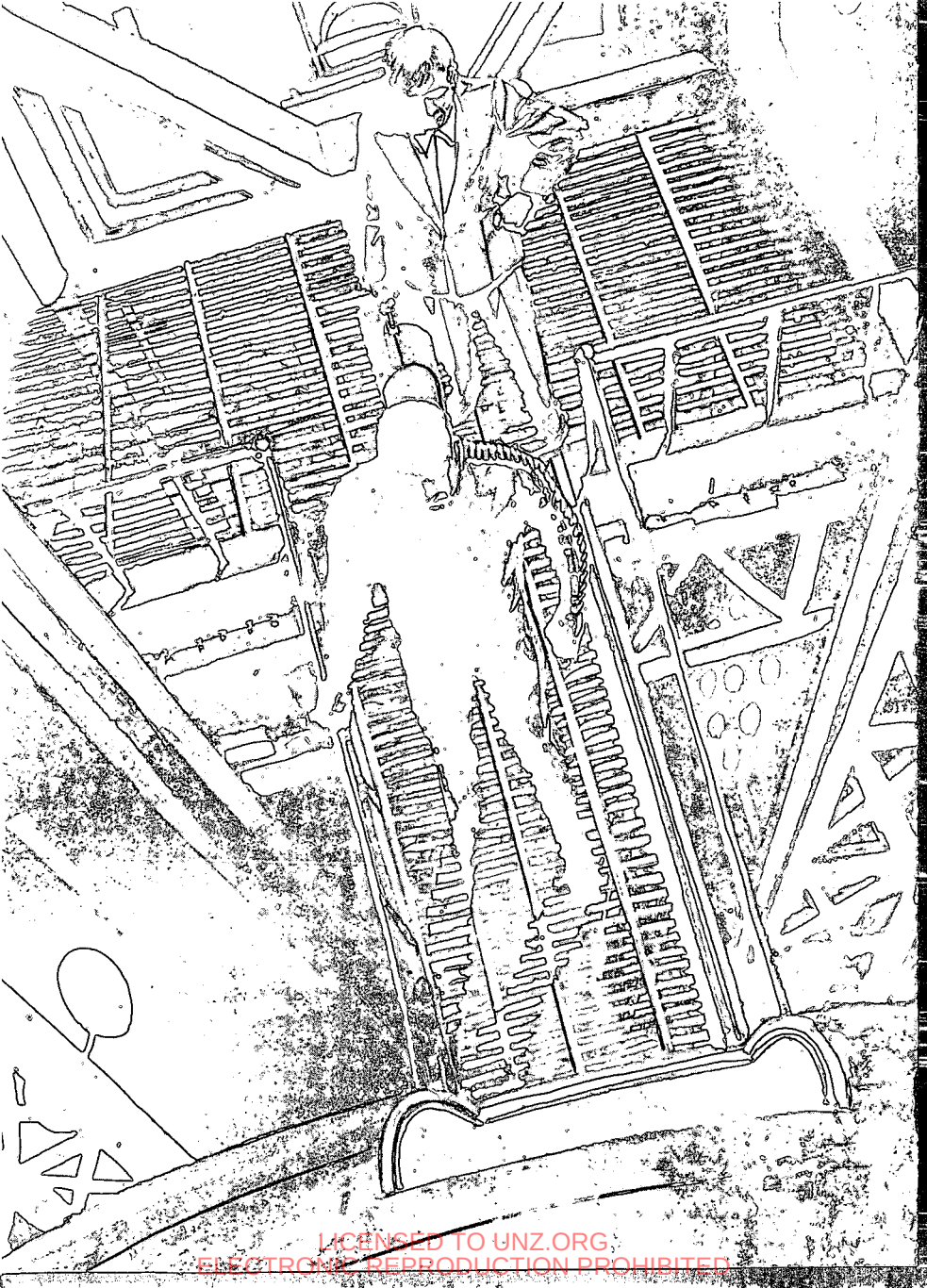

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he had thought, but a three-foot square was not much of a cross section. All surfaces inside were thickly padded and springy to the touch.

"Here's the light switch," the spacer said, turning on a soft interior light. "The rest of the facilities and instructions are on this plate beside the hatch. Okay now, grab that handhold up there so you go in feet first. Alley-oop!"

As long as I don't come out that way, thought Winstead, sliding into the compartment with surprising ease. He twisted around and discovered that the door had a small window.

"Make yourself comfortable," said the spacer. "Just don't forget to close the hatch when the takeoff buzzer sounds. You'd better listen for it."

He turned away. Winstead saw him look into several other little windows along the bulkhead.

"Are there other passengers?" asked Winstead.

"No. Just checking to see if all my crew stayed. Always seems to be one that slides down the pipe before takeoff. Dunno why they sign on if they don't like the risk."

"What — what risk?"

"Didn't the Agency tell you? We've got nothing below here but tanks of concentrated landing fuel for the station on Gelbchen II. The idea makes some of them nervous now and then. They talk quiet, they walk quiet, and they wouldn't wear an orange suit."

He pulled open a door and nodded in gloomy satisfaction when the compartment proved to be empty.

"*Is* it dangerous?" asked Winstead.

THE spacer gnawed upon a very short thumbnail. "What's dangerous?" he retorted at last. "You can get killed any day under a downcoming aircar."

Winstead considered. "Where's the captain?" he inquired.

"I'm the captain."

"But — aren't you preparing to blast off?"

"I generally let my second pilot do it," said the spacer.

"But why? I thought —"

"Why? Because I own the ship, that's why."

"What has that got to do with it?" said Winstead. "I should think you'd want all the more to handle it yourself!"

"Listen — I sweated out years in space, saving the price of this can. If she blows up, d'you think I want to know that I did it? There's the buzzer. Button up!"

He pulled himself into a compartment like Winstead's and clapped the door shut. Winstead, beginning to perspire gently, found the safety straps, secured himself, and awaited the worst.

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The *Leaky Dipper* sped through interstellar space for five silent and introverted days before reaching the little yellow sun named Gelbchen. The highlight of the flight was the day one of the crew dropped his mess tray on the deck, causing one faint, one case of palpitations, and one fist fight, in approximately that order.

The captain spent two days groping his way into an orbit about the second planet. When he announced that the cargo would be pumped into a number of small local tankers that had risen from the surface to meet them, Winstead volunteered to go down in the first one.

"Don't blame you," said the swarthy spacer. "I'd like to go too. Don't worry — they'll be good and careful landing. The stuff's that much more expensive now that it's been freighted out here."

"That is a — a great relief," said Winstead. "It's been very interesting. Good-by and good luck!"

"Likewise," said the captain.

If I ever meet Aubrey again! thought Winstead.

On the surface of the planet, he met with a thriving community that lived in a peculiar milieu blended of well-being and isolation. The spaceport was a center for refueling and repair. It was supported by mines and mills, and by just enough agricultural organization to get by. The standard of living was comfortably high because of the services rendered and charged for; but some of the customs struck Winstead as being almost too informal.

"I think you're pulling my leg!" exclaimed the slim blonde at the Agency counter when Winstead was escorted in from the field. "Nobody would travel on the *Leaky Dipper* without being paid for it. You must have real nerve!"

She leaned uninhibitedly across the counter and planted a kiss on his cheek. He could not help noticing that she was not slim everywhere.

"I assure you, Miss — er — here are my papers."

"Oh, those! Let me see, I have a stamp somewhere in one of my drawers."

SHE rummaged through several hiding places under the counter. Winstead thought of the compartments on the *Leaky Dipper*. He leaned wearily on one elbow.

"Oh, well, it's time to close up anyway," the girl decided. She swept his papers into a drawer, after a fast glance at them. "We can fix these up tomorrow, Bob."

"You are a very quick reader," Winstead said.

"It said 'Robert L.,' didn't it?

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That's all I was looking for — your name. Mine's Carole, just to keep things straight. Now, since no more ships are due and no passengers can leave tonight, let's get out of here."

Winstead looked around, but the mechanic who had brought him in from the field had long since disappeared. Other clerks went about their own affairs in the background without showing any interest in him.

Carole hoisted herself onto the counter and twisted across in a swirl of skirts. There was no way for Winstead to avoid catching her. He saw that she was not really slim *anywhere.*

Grabbing his hand, she set off at a smart pace. He had just time to hook his bag off the counter as they passed it.

"You'll be wanting a place to stay," she said. "I'll bet you never slept well on that spaceship."

This so neatly paralleled Winstead's own opinion that he rejected a half-formed impulse to drag his feet.

They dashed pell-mell through a wide exit from the building to a parking lot. Carole led the way to a monstrous groundcar that looked as if its mother had been frightened by a truck. A moment later, they were boosting up to stellar speed along a more-or-less paved road to the city.

"They call it 'Junction,'" Carole informed him. "You'd think they could have picked a better name for the only real city on the planet."

They buzzed through a narrow band of suburbs, along the edge of an open square and decelerated at a well-lighted avenue that looked like an entertainment section. Winstead noted that most of the men and women strolling past the taverns and theaters were dressed in work clothes.

"Just finishing their shifts, like me," Carole explained.

She slowed the monster a bit more upon entering a side street. They came to a section of four- and five-storied buildings whose metal curtain walls had the air of business offices. It developed immediately that they were apartment houses.

Carole pulled into an opening in a row of parked vehicles similar to hers. Winstead got out quickly, since his hostess seemed about to crawl across his lap to reach the door. He stared at the groundcar meditatively.

"Awful heap, isn't it?" said the blonde. "They have to make them that way here, so they can be converted for trucking. The spaceships count on Gelbchen II; everything else — including us — is what can be scraped up to do the job. Well, come on in!"

I really must be very tired,

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Winstead thought as he meekly followed the girl into the lobby of the building.

INSIDE, two youths in coveralls were lounging on wooden chairs of austere design. One leaped to his feet at the sight of Carole. As he strode toward them, Winstead glanced over his shoulder to make sure of the door.

Turning back, he was just in time to find the young man seizing Carole in an enthusiastic embrace. The two melted together in a passionate kiss. Then the young man stepped back, checked his wristwatch and dashed for the door.

"Good night, kid," he called to her over his shoulder.

Carole waved jauntily. She took Winstead by the elbow.

"That was Wilfie," she explained. "We'll be getting married if we can ever get our job shifts straightened out. I hope I didn't make him late, poor boy — it was his only chance to see me until tomorrow."

Winstead was hardly aware of having been steered into an elevator. When they reached the second floor, Carole led him a few steps along the hall. She used a simple light-key to open an apartment door. Winstead followed her inside wordlessly.

"Let me take your bag," she said. "In here is the bedroom. I'll bet you didn't have that much room on the spaceship."

"Well . . ."

"Now let's go in the kitchen and see what we can get you for dinner. I might as well feed you, since I figure to charge you fifty credits for the night."

Winstead remained silent by a considerable effort.

He wondered what his expression showed. Carole did not seem to notice anything. She prattled on about the folly of trying to find a room in one of the few hotels boasted by the city of Junction. Most of them, she claimed, would be full of carousing spacers. Meanwhile, she rummaged through a frozen food unit.

Winstead agreed to something in a foil package without knowing what. She popped it into an automatic infra-red heater. He allowed himself to be led by the hand to a large chair in the living room.

"There's the entertainment program for the TV," she told him. "Not that we have much here — most of it is old tapes from Terra. Make yourself comfortable while I change."

She pattered off into the bedroom, leaving Winstead weighing the program in a limp hand. He looked around the room. There were two doors to rooms or exits he had not been shown. What he had seen or could examine from

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where he sat was very comfortably furnished, with a resilient carpet substitute from wall to wall and new-looking furniture of the simple Gelbchen style. Carole seemed partial to reds and other bright colors. Only the pastels of the walls had prevented a disaster.

Is it worth fifty credits? he asked himself. *On the other hand, if I go out looking for a hotel, will I just happen to have a hard time getting a ship?*

He glanced indecisively at the door to the bedroom into which Carole had vanished. It had been left slightly ajar. About the time he became aware of this, a tinny chime began to sound from the direction of the kitchen.

It continued until Winstead realized that he would have to investigate for himself. He entered the kitchen to find that the automatic heater had flipped up a small sign saying, *"Hot!"*

HE GUESSED the right button to get the door of the appliance open, looked around until he located a tray and tongs, and removed his dinner. Further search supplied him with cutlery. He opened the foil, discovering that he had chosen a meal of roast beef with mashed potatoes and two vegetables he had never seen on Terra.

Carole still had not appeared, so he carried his tray out to the dining area, which was furnished with bronze-colored metal chairs and table. It looked like a dinner for one, he reflected, but he was on a strange planet. As he hesitated, the bedroom door was flung back and footsteps sounded behind him.

"Go ahead and enjoy it," called Carole. "Wine in the sideboard there. Then make yourself at home for the night."

Winstead turned. The girl was bending to zip the front of one shoe. She was clad in coveralls of a yellow that made Winstead blink.

"I'm off," she announced cheerfully. "Got a second-shift job as an ambulance driver. I tell you, it's one big rat race to meet expenses on Gelbchen II! It helps when I can bring home guests from the spaceport, but Wilfie wants me to cut that out when we get married."

She waved and bustled out to the elevator.

Winstead wondered whether he had said good night.

He discovered after some minutes that he was leaning on the table with one thumb in the hot potatoes. He sat down, examining his thumb attentively. After due consideration, he licked off the potato, found a fork, and began to prod dubiously at the

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local idea of vegetables . . .

He awoke next morning with a start of surprise at finding himself in neither a net nor a padded compartment. The bed was soft. It invited him to roll over for another half hour's snooze in the faintly perfumed room.

Perfume?

Bedroom . . . *Carole!*

Winstead sat straight up as full memory returned.

Everything was quiet. He threw back the electric blanket, checked a clock that must be set to planetary time, and decided that it was early morning. The window filters yielded to trial-and-error manipulation, flooding the room with cheerful sunlight not unlike that of a Terran summer morning. Winstead walked softly to the door and opened it a crack. The room outside remained dim and silent.

He washed in the adjoining bathroom and dressed rapidly. Feeling better prepared for the day, he sallied out to seek breakfast. The first sight that met his eyes was that of Carole sleeping on a couch under an aquamarine blanket she had plugged in at the socket of a floor lamp.

The thought of fifty credits restrained the impulse to pat her blonde head in commiseration. He thought of it a little more, thereby fighting down a mild attack of conscience over appropriating the bed.

After all, he thought, *here I have to get my own breakfast. She's probably tired out, but that's the reward of moonlighting. It's her planet, not mine.*

WINSTEAD tiptoed to the kitchen door, slipped furtively through, and closed the door as quietly as possible behind him.

Two men eating breakfast at a small table looked up at him amiably.

"Gaagh!" said Winstead.

"Good morning," replied one man, who wore a rather feminine dressing gown.

The other, a ruddy, farmerish individual, grunted past a mouthful of toast.

"I beg your pardon," Winstead said.

"You must be another star traveler," said the gentleman in the dressing gown. "We knew there must be one when we saw Carole on the couch. I hope she gets you out of here quicker than she's finding a ship for me."

"You have been waiting for a spaceship?" Winstead asked.

"Over two weeks now," said the other. "The kid's fair enough about it, I must admit. She can't ship me toward Epseri, so she's been giving me a discount on my room."

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"Sit down and have some eggs," invited the farmer type. "Brought 'em into town myself, along with my other produce."

Winstead eyed the platter of fried eggs. They were entirely too large to have come from chickens, but they looked good. He decided not to ask any questions.

It developed after he joined them at the table that the farmer was in the habit of boarding with Carole whenever he came to Junction on business. The traveler, one Cecil Feigelson, excused his borrowing Carole's robe on grounds of the scanty baggage allowed space travelers and the fact that he had been hanging about for so long. They assured him that he looked fine in pink.

Winstead drained his cup of coffee substitute, considered having another.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, "it hardly seems necessary to spend all that time finding a ship headed for Epseri. I — uh — happen to be going that way too. I suspect that a good, close look at the schedules down at the spaceport might show us a way."

"But Carole is the clerk in charge."

"I also happen to know a little about how it's done," said Winstead quietly. He added, "From traveling so much you know."

"Well, if you think anything can be done, I'm all for it."

"When the kid wakes up, she could drive you down," suggested the farmer.

"That should require only a moment to arrange," said Winstead, rising to fill a pitcher with ice water. *Fifty credits a night!* he thought. *Wait till I get my hands on her shipping schedules!*

Hardly five minutes later, they all spilled out of the elevator into the lobby. Carole was still rather damp and angry. Cecil Feigelson's suitcase zipper was only three-quarters closed. Fortunately, he was wearing pants under the girl's dressing gown, which clashed horribly with Winstead's rumpled orange suit.

"Hey!" someone yelped as they blazed through the lobby.

Young Wilfie catapulted from a chair where he appeared to have been dozing.

Doesn't he have a home? wondered Winstead.

BY THE time they reached Carole's groundcar outside, the youth had somehow inserted himself into the group in place of the farmer. Winstead set the machine in motion while the others were scrambling for seats.

"Do you know how to drive one of these, friend?" asked Feigelson.

"I am an expert groundcar operator," Winstead assured him.

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Unfortunately, he was soon forced to admit, he was accustomed to Terran cars that floated on cushions of air. Although bumps in the spaceport road encouraged a good deal of floating at the speed he was making, the Gelbchen vehicle was really designed for less intermittent wheel-to-ground contact.

The trip seemed shorter, though, than it had the previous evening. Winstead skidded to a halt at their destination and discovered that he was perspiring slightly. His passengers were in a frank sweat and lost several yards trailing him into the terminal and over to the Agency counter.

When they arrived, still quite pale, Winstead was already up to his elbows in shipping schedules and blank forms. A few passing clerks glanced curiously at Feigelson's frilly pink dressing gown, but they were used to outworld garb.

"Wait! That's my Galatlas you're tearing apart!" Carole protested breathlessly.

"How would you know, my dear?" asked Winstead, riffling the pages furiously. "Hah! Just as I thought — this cruise ship down here for supplies, the *Virgo*, is listed to make New Ceres next. The Galatlas shows that New Ceres is halfway to Epseri, Feigelson!"

"Wilfie!" wailed Carole. "Make him stop tearing the place apart like a saloon! Look at that stack of folders spilled all over the floor!"

Wilfie bestirred himself, but he was handicapped by being on the other side of the counter with Carole and Feigelson.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded truculently. "Where did you come from, anyway?"

"I came from Terra," said Winstead, pausing in filling out a form, "and I am more than ready to return. Combining a vacation with a business inspection trip occasionally becomes too exciting for a man of my years."

"Inspection trip?" echoed Carole, freezing.

"My hobby," said Winstead. "It keeps one in touch with the people who make the Agency go. This place, now, is the most slapdash, disorganized — Young man! You quit one of your jobs and take over this branch of the Interstellar Travel Agency. Don't argue — of course you can! What is your full name?"

"*Me?*" gasped Wilfie. "Wilfred Evans."

"All right, Evans, you're hired. You'll be able to get married and put a stop to all this nonsense of renting rooms while ships go out without our passengers."

"What authority have you to

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— " began Carole indignantly.

"The first test of a chief agent," said Winstead, scribbling upon a business card, "is to know when to tell an assistant manager to button her hatch."

Wilfie accepted the card and glanced at both print and scribbling.

"Button your hatch!" he ordered Carole over his shoulder.

SHE STOOD silent, her mouth open about the same distance as Feigelson's. Winstead looked about for a local clock, and snatched up one of the sheets strewn about the counter. A departure time listed upon it made him swear. He leaped to Carole's phone, switching on sound and screen with one swipe of his thumb.

The blonde advanced a timid step, to read the card bearing Wilfie's appointment.

"Robert Winstead Lewis, Terra . . . President, Interstellar Travel Agency . . ."

"Winstead" was shouting at a face on the phone screen.

"You tell them who I am!" he demanded, holding up another of his cards to the scanner. "They'll manage to hold the ship three minutes until we reach her!"

He switched off, mopping his forehead with the back of his hand, and started around the counter. Carole swayed weakly against Feigelson's supporting arm.

"Now, then!" snapped Winstead. "This branch will be checked in the near future, Evans. I trust that you are the sort of man who can show a firm hand, should he return home to discover a star traveler in his bedroom."

He smacked the flat of his own hand significantly upon the counter, staring at Carole between the eyes. Wilfie nodded thoughtfully.

Robert Winstead Lewis flagged down an unwary porter driving by on an empty baggage truck.

"Bring the bags, Feigelson!" he commanded, hopping aboard and seizing the controls. "As far as New Ceres, anyhow, we'll be going first-class!"

Picking up speed, the baggage truck squealed around a turn and headed for an exit to the spaceport. The porter looked back with a horrified expression, the pink gown fluttered beside the orange suit one last time, and they disappeared through the portal.

The air about the disorganized counter and reorganized agents continued to vibrate for some minutes.

Finally, the distant roar of a ship lifting for space penetrated to restore a sense of relative peace. — H. B. FYFE

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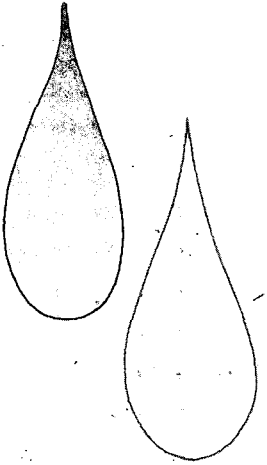

BLUEBLOOD

There were two varieties of aliens—blue and bluer—but not as blue as the Earthmen!

By JIM HARMON **Illustrated by WOOD**

EVEN if I'm only a space pilot, I'm not dumb. I mean I'm not *that* dumb. I admit that Dr. Ellik and Dr. Chon outrank me, because that's the way it's got to be. A pilot is only an expendable part. But I had been the first one to see the natives on this planet, and I was the first one to point out that they came in two attractive shades of blue, light blue and dark blue.

Four Indigos were carrying an Azure. I called the others over to the screen.

"A sedan chair," identified Lee Chon. "Think the light-skinned one is a kind of a priest?"

Mike Ellik shook his head. "I doubt it. The chair isn't ornate enough. I think that's probably the standard method of travel—at least for a certain social elite."

"Do you notice anything unusual about those bully boys?"

"You tell me what you see," Ellik evaded.

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"Three of them are mongoloid idiots," said Chon.

"I thought so," Ellik said, "but I wasn't quite sure—aliens and all."

"They're humanoids," Chon said, "and humanoids are my specialty. I know."

"The fourth one doesn't look much better."

"His features are slack and his jaw is loose, all right, but they aren't *made* that way. It's an expression he could change. His head isn't shaped like that."

"Um. The man in the chair is a striking specimen. No cerebral damage in him."

"I don't think the answer is brain damage. If the 'noble' trusts those four to carry him, their actions and reflexes must be pretty well coordinated. They can't have anything like palsy or epilepsy."

"They must breed a special type of slave for the job," Ellik suggested.

"They aren't slaves, Mike," I told him.

"No?" Ellik said, like talking to a kid. "And what are they, Mike?"

I BREATHED out hard, a little disgusted that big brains like Ellik and Chon couldn't see the translucent truth. "They are just four dumb slobs who can't get a better job, so they are hauling His Highness around because they have to make a living the hard way."

"That doesn't quite cover it, Johnny," Chon said. "The carriers are a completely different race."

"What's different about them?" I asked. "They've got hands to work with, eyes to see with, noses to smell with. If you kick one of them, I bet he'll hurt. It's just their bad luck to be dumb slobs."

Ellik grunted. "Unfortunately, Johnny, there are subtler differences. The darker aliens, the indigo-colored ones, seem to be definitely down further on the scale of local evolution. They must be an inferior race to the lighter, azure species."

Chon had been looking at us and listening to everything. Finally he said, "You can't be sure of that, Mike. You haven't seen all of the Indigos. Some of them may not be as far down as the common carriers."

Ellik sighed. "Explorers have to make snap decisions on insufficient data. We don't have time to see the whole damned planet before we write up a report."

"Yes, explorers have to make snap decisions," Chon repeated to himself. "Are you going to take a look at those buildings, see if it's a village?"

"I thought I'd see if our blue-

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blood friend out there wants to show it to me," said Mike Ellik.

"He won't," I said.

They both looked at me.

"You don't have any chair and nobody to carry you," I went on. "He'll think you're just a slob."

"Jonathan," Ellik said, "you show occasional flashes of genius."

I smiled and shrugged it off. "I know I'm not nearly as smart as you boys. But that doesn't mean I can't think *at all.*"

Ellik clapped me on the shoulder. "Of course it doesn't."

But his grip was too strong.

"Johnny," Ellik said gravely, "do you think *you* could carry me?"

"Wait a minute. You want me to act like one of those slobs? That's asking a lot."

"But could you?"

"Not all the way to those buildings. What was the gravity reading, Lee?"

CHON closed his eyes a second. "Point nine seven three."

"There!" I said. "I couldn't tote you three or four miles piggy-back."

"Look," Chon said, "we can strip down a magnetic flyer and you can ride the seat, Mike. Johnny can pretend to carry you, like on a platter. It'll impress the yokels with the strength of our flunkies."

"*Mike* could carry *me,*" I pointed out.

Chon laid a delicate hand on my back. "But, buddy, Mike outranks you."

I shook my head. "Not that way, he doesn't."

"We may be going to a lot of trouble for nothing," Mike said. "That gang may jump us as soon as we decant and try to have us for dinner."

"There's always that risk," Chon agreed solemnly, "but naturally I will remain on duty at the controls of the stun cannon."

"Securely inside," Ellik added.

"Always on duty," Chon said.

"Always inside," Ellik said.

"It's in the records, Ellik. I took the last one." Lee said it a little too sharp and it cut the kidding.

"Go soak your soft head in brine," Ellik said, disgruntled.

"Wait a minute," Chon called.

Ellik turned back. "Yeah?"

"Don't forget to take your communicator with you." Chon's voice was choked. "You may get out of line of sight if you go off with that troupe."

"I know this business," Ellik said, turning away.

"Mike, I'm sorry if I offended you. Shake, huh?"

Ellik smiled sourly. "Forget it."

"Come on, shake."

"Okay, we're buddies. Do I

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actually have to pump your clammy paw?"

"Please!"

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" Ellik turned around and kissed Chon on the forehead.

Ellik was just sore, of course. But the manual warns against that sort of horseplay when you've been out a long time.

"Satisfied now?" Ellik asked.

"No." Chon's voice was strained tight. "It should have been me to kiss you." Chon turned to me. "Luck out there, Johnny."

I grabbed his hand and levered it fast, before he could decide I needed kissing. "Sure thing, Lee. Thanks."

THE buildings weren't much to see, but they were a step above primitive huts. They were adobe, or maybe plastic. The aliens understood the stress principles of the dome, Ellik said, because all the buildings had curved roofs. Unbaked pottery was what they looked like to me, and they looked as if they would be brittle as coffee-colored chalk. Actually, their ceramic surfaces were at least as hard as steel.

The Azure had welcomed Ellik with an outstretched hand. Mike wasn't one to jump to conclusions, so he just held out his own hand. The native grabbed and let it go after pulling it some.

The alien saw me apparently carrying Ellik on a seat cushion with one hand, and he kicked me in the leg. To test my muscles, I guess. I managed to keep from yelling or jumping. The Azure looked impressed and the Indigos did a bad job of hiding a lot of envy and hate.

As the Indigos toted their man along on the litter and I guided Ellik's seat cushion along the channel of magnetic feedback, the two riders began talking. Ellik's translator collar broke the language barrier, of course. It was a two-way communicator on a direct hook-up to our cybernetic calculator on the ship. The brain analyzed the phonetic structure of the alien language under various systems of logic or anti-logic and fed the translation into Ellik's ear. Then it went through its memory banks and played back the right sounds to translate Ellik's talk into the alien language. I understand things like that. I'm a pretty good mechanic.

I didn't have my translator turned on, but it seemed to me that somehow I could understand what the plug-uglies, the Indigos, were saying.

Ellik told me that it was because all their speech was based on the one universal humanoid sound, "mama." Everything good in the way of nouns and verbs

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(there were no other particles of speech) was some inflection of "m-m" and everything bad was "uh-m-m."

Ellik was pretty "uh-m-m."

I was *plenty* "uh-m-m." I threatened their jobs, they thought.

They were a real miserable bunch of slobs, those Indigos.

We passed through the wide places between the houses — I wouldn't call them streets—and saw a lot of Indigos crouched in doorways, watching us, and Azures being toted around.

The clothing they wore was also pretty universal for sentient bipeds—a tunic or sarong, kind of. For the Azures, it was smooth and colorful; and for the Indigos, a loincloth of some rough, dun-colored stuff.

Ellik chinned off his translator switch and leaned down toward my ear. "They are two distinct races, Johnny. Notice that *all* the Indigos are menials. There does not appear to be anything to correspond to a freedman or even a higher-ranked house servant. The Azures treat the Indigos only as animals."

"Slobs," I said. "Poor dumb slobs."

The nuclear flash washed over us, peppering us with a few excess roentgens.

We couldn't look at the spaceship going up, but we knew it was going. It was making a dawn.

The aliens were all frightened. They fell on the ground and started praying to the ship, all of them, the Azures and the Indigos.

"What's wrong with that crazy Chinaman?" Ellik yelped.

"Lee knows what he's doing," I said.

Ellik unsnapped his communicator from his belt. "Johnny says you know what you're doing, Chon. *Do you?*"

"I know." Chon's voice sounded right beside us, perfectly natural. Belt communicators work just as well as those consoles. People only buy consoles for prestige.

"Well?" Ellik demanded. "What *are* you doing, Lee?"

I thought maybe something had gone wrong with the communicator.

Chon's voice finally reached us.

"I'm leaving you and Johnny on this planet, Mike," he said.

AN Indigo brought us in our morning supply of fruit.

Ellik felt me looking at him. kicked the Indigo. "It's overripe, blockhead. *Amum, amum.*"

The Indigo backed out, bowing, eyes very round.

Ellik felt me looking at him.

"Well, I don't *like* kicking the oaf, but that's all he's been con-

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ditioned to understand as a sign of disapproval."

"Sure," I said.

Ellik passed through the scimitar of gray shadow into the sunlight that washed lines and years out of his face. He braced a hand against the doorframe and craned his head back. It stopped and steadied.

"He's still there," Ellik said. "Sometimes I wish his orbit would decay enough to burn him up in this damned sour air." He coughed into his fist.

"He could probably correct," I suggested.

Ellik sneered. "He hasn't got the brains."

"Pretty hard for one man to manage a takeoff. He was lucky to make it into orbit."

"I just wish he would come down. Somehow, someway, I'd get to him, no matter where he went on this planet."

"I suppose that's why he stays up."

Ellik slammed his fist into his palm. "I'm going to call him again. He can't get away without us. If he fouled up a takeoff that badly, he's not going to try to solo into hyperspace."

"I don't think anyone would solo into hyperspace. I don't think he would be able to come back."

"Oh, what do you know about it?" Ellik said shortly. "He's just building up his courage to try the big jump. He's yellow, sure, but sooner or later he'll get desperate enough, or scared enough, to actually go. Then we'll be stranded for fair. This planet may not be colonized for centuries!"

"Probably never," I said. "Not after Lee's reports."

"You think he would falsify reports?" Ellik asked, blinking at me.

"I suppose he'll have to."

Ellik held his head with his hands. "Of course, of course. There's no limit to the depths to which he would plummet." He ran over to the corner and snatched a communicator off the pile of our gear. "I'm going to call him and tell him what I think of him and his wild obsession."

I didn't remind Ellik that he had been telling Chon just that at least once a day for a month. I knew his nerves got tighter and tighter and cussing out Chon helped release them and make him feel better.

"Come down, Lee!" Ellik called. "The three of us can make the jump together. You're martyring yourself for a crazy reason!"

"We've talked this over before," Chon answered. "This is the last time I'm going to respond to your call. I've made it clear to you that I think knowledge of this world will cause

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great suffering, a lot of death, among the majority of Earth's people."

"You're talking prejudice, Lee! *Your* prejudice. People aren't like that any more."

"We haven't gone *that* far, Mike. The bigots, the hatemongers, the pettiness and xenophobia lurking in everybody haven't been asleep that long. Just look at it from *my* side, Mike. What will the white people of Earth think about the Orientals, Negroes and Indians of Earth when they find out the dark-skinned humanoids of another planet are — measurably, unquestionably, vastly — *inferior* to the light-skinned race of the same world? I ask you, Mike!"

MIKE ELLIK said, "It's an inept analogy, Lee, and you know it."

"But most people reason by analogy," said Lee Chon. "No, Mike. I have to leave you and Johnny to prevent a recurrence of racial hatred, intolerance and all the ugly consequences on both sides. This is the last time I'll answer you, Mike. I'm getting lonesome. In a few years, I'll get hungry for human companionship. I don't want to be tempted down. Good-by, Johnny. So long, Mike."

Ellik screamed. "Wait! Answer one more call, Lee. It's the least you can do for me. I don't know when I'll make it. It may be in a few weeks or a few years. It won't be just argument, Lee. I'll have something you'll *want* to tell Earth about this place and these people."

"I'm still here. Tell it to me now," Chon's voice said.

"No. I want to get proof. Let me rig up some kind of video circuit for you. I can use parts out of our tape camera and the translators. I want to get it all across to you."

I could hear Chon breathing. "Very well. I'll answer your next call."

"Lee," I called out, "Mike and me will be expecting you to answer."

Chon laughed. "I'm not going anywhere, Johnny. Only around this world every couple of hours."

"You couldn't make the jump through hyperspace without us, Lee," Ellik said.

"That's right, Mike. I'm—I'm sorry to quarantine you two down there."

"Quarantine!" Ellik stormed. *"We're* not sick, Lee. *You* are the sick one!"

There wasn't any sound, not even of breathing.

"You have an idea to change Lee's mind, Mike?" I asked.

He cupped his hand on the back of my neck. "Affirmative,

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Jonathan. A pretty damned good one, too."

Ellik stood staring out the door, gnawing on one of his knuckles, letting the sun turn the front of him into gold, so he looked like half a statue, and half a man.

"I suppose it had to come out in him sooner or later," he said.

"What, Mike?"

"What could we expect? It's the basic quality of treachery in the Oriental mind."

WHEN the shadows were at their longest and the alien sun was down the closest to the horizon without actually going under, Ellik marched up the path shoving a new Indigo. The Azures supplied Mike with all the flunkies he wanted to gather food and the like for him, as his natural right. But I thought we had enough of them hanging around our quarters. I couldn't imagine what he would want with another one.

The alien hovered at the door. Ellik kicked him in the calf to make him understand he was to go inside.

"Look at him, Johnny," Ellik said, pushing the fellow forward. "Not a mongoloid, would you say?"

"No."

The alien looked stupid—blue and stupid. His face was hanging there, but it wasn't pushed out of shape any more than the faces of the Azures. The Indigo blinked back at me. What he also looked was not friendly.

Ellik took the Indigo's cheeks in his hand and angled the face toward the light. "He's a half-breed, Johnny, or otherwise the gene was recessive. He wasn't damaged before birth, only after —when he started to breathe."

"What do you mean, Mike?"

"You ever hear of cyanosis, Johnny?"

"No."

"Well, these creatures have something like it. The Indigos don't get enough oxygen in their blood cells. It makes them sluggish; it turns them blue like the pictures of 'blue babies' in the old books."

"I never saw a picture like that in an old book," I said.

"Did you ever *see* a book? Sorry, Johnny. Just kidding." Ellik rubbed his hands together. "Well! I theorized that there is no basic difference in the Azures and the Indigos except improper aeration of their blood. So, you see, an Indigo is only a *sick* Azure, and I am going to make this Indigo *well*."

"How can you do that?"

"It's simple," Mike said irritably. "The Indigos must have a malformation of the heart causing an abnormal communication

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between the venous and arterial side of the circulation system. A little surgery and I adjust a valve in the heart. No more communication. Proper aeration. Enough oxygen. The deep blue color goes, leaving only the lighter blue of the natural pigmentation. The patient feels better, acts better, thinks better, looks better. In short, he is no longer an Indigo but an Azure."

"Is—is this what you're going to show Lee?" I ventured.

"Of course! It proves the Indigos *aren't* an inferior race. They are the same as the Azures except that they are sick. Their being sick can't reflect unfavorably on any terrestrial colored race. There is no analogy. But I have to prove it to Chon. We're going to tape the whole process and feed it to him."

"I think," I said, "that that might get to him."

"Sure it will." Ellik's jaw muscles flexed. "I should ruin Lee with this thing, but I won't. I'm not a vindictive man. Lee and I will probably be working together for years. But whenever he gets out of line — has some stubborn idea about doing something his way—don't think I won't remind him of this!"

Suddenly, he was smiling again. He turned to the gawking Indigo. He pointed two fingers at him.

"Mmr?" Ellik asked.

The alien tapped himself on his chest cavity twice. *"Mhaw,"* he gave his name.

"Mhaw M'i uh M'i m M'm'-uh?" Ellik asked him, without even using the translators.

"M-m-M-m-M," the alien went, slapping himself on the chest with his opened palms.

Ellik turned to me, grinning. "I asked him if he wanted to stop being an Indigo and become an Azure. He thinks I can do anything and he's all for it."

AFTER we fed Mhaw a dose of null-shock from our packs, Doc Ellik started to slice him open with a ceramic knife he had borrowed from the Azures.

But Ellik had forgotten that the alien might get frightened seeing himself cut open, even if he couldn't feel any pain. It had never happened to him before.

The alien lumbered to his feet, his chest hanging open, showing his heart beating like some animal caught inside a blueberry pudding.

I drove a right cross into his jaw, and felt the jar all the way up to my shoulder.

He melted back down onto the pallet.

"Good work, Johnny," Ellik said, stooping and starting his work.

Right away, Mhaw started to

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lose that Indigo color and get real light — lighter than the Azures, in fact. None of the blue of the race was actually in the pigmentation, Mike found out. Even the Azures suffered some degree of improper aeration of the blood.

"You going to call Lee Chon now?" I asked Mike. "You going to show him the tape we had running during the operation and all?"

"Not quite yet, Johnny," he said. "First I want to educate Mhaw a bit, up to the Azure level or better. That should convince Lee."

Mhaw learned fast, probably faster than the Azures, even. Almost the first thing he wanted was for us to stop calling him Mhaw and start using an Azure name, Aedo.

Once a day, Ellik left our hut to take some exercise—a walk along the alien esplanade, he called it. I used to stay with the doctored alien, now Aedo, but we finally learned we could trust him to follow our orders—which were to stay inside, away from the others, since we didn't know how they would take him. So I got to walking along with Ellik.

As dusk lengthened, we could see the spark that was our ship in its orbit along the retreating horizon.

Ellik twisted back his head and the side of his mouth. "Look at him up there—*look!*"

The spark burned brighter and danced in another direction.

"He's gone! He left us!" Ellik said.

"It's okay. He's still there. Just corrected the orbit a little, I guess."

"No, no, no," Ellik said. "He started to make another try. But he got afraid to try to go into hyperspace alone."

"He was just correcting for orbital decay."

"You don't understand, Johnny. He's a coward. That makes him dangerous. He's getting desperate. That desperation will burst the dam of his own weakness and wash away our hope, *our lives.*"

His voice hushed. He stood staring starkly ahead, his palms outstretched at his sides.

"Maybe he isn't *that* cowardly," I said hopefully.

"FINISHED," Ellik announced. He meant he had finished editing the tape showing the operation on the alien and his recovery from his blue disease, from being an Indigo to better than an Azure.

"The transmitter is finished too," I said.

Ellik had suggested a way of switching the tape camera to a video converter for one of the

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audio communicators, and I had been able to do it easy. It took parts from both our communicators and translators too.

Ellik fitted the coiled snake of tape into place. "This will be a great day for your people, Aedo. After our friend from heaven lands, we will be able to teach you a way to cure all of your sick, to make all the Indigos like you."

"Like me? Make like me?" Aedo said in the pidgin terrestrial that Mike Ellik had taught him.

"Yes. We'll show them how we cured you and how all can be cured."

"You make show fellow like me? Make tell make that fellow like fellow like me?"

"Everything's ready, Mike," I called.

"That's right, Aedo," Mike said. "You'll show your people the way to equality."

"Make all fellow like this fellow?" Aedo asked.

"Shall I call in Lee?" I asked Mike.

"Yes, that's right, Aedo. Just right."

"No," Aedo said.

The alien stomped the tape camera and the communicator to bits before I could get a hammerlock on him.

Ellik just stared at the complete wreck of our only means of communication with the spaceship.

"I be much man now. I much smart. Much smart than Azure hicks and Indigo slobs. I much smart all. I much man! Not to be all same now. *No.*" The snarl hung on in Aedo's throat.

Ellik lifted his head and sort of smiled. But not quite.

"Well," he said slowly and sadly, "what could you expect in the way of gratitude from a dirty alien?"

THE Azures did accept Aedo all right. They seem to think he must have come from some other tribe. They don't associate him with the Indigo that disappeared. No Indigo ever became an Azure before.

Of course, Azures sometimes become Indigos, we found out.

It seems there's a virus of what Ellik called pseudo-cyanosis in the air. The Azures have become a pretty resistant breed to it, while the Indigos are all easy victims. But once in a while an Azure will come down with it and turn Indigo.

Mike Ellik caught it too.

It happened pretty fast. By the time we realized what it was, he was already too stupid to finish the operation he started on himself. I had to sew him up, not very neatly.

Ellik is treated pretty much

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like the rest of the Indigos. So am I. He takes it all pretty calm. He can still talk a little Earth. Whenever anybody kicks him, Ellik just mutters something about, "What can fellow expect bunch lousy creeps like those fellow?"

I guess I'll get it too. I think I am getting it.

It won't be so bad for me. Just like maybe going around drunk all the time, not being able to think or coordinate very well.

It will be kind of bad being a member of an inferior race, but the thing I'll hate about it the most isn't that, or even leaving old Lee up there, circling around and waiting for our call forever.

No, the thing I hate is having it happen *now*, just when I'm beginning to *learn* something.

I'm not dead sure I know just exactly what I learned, but I think maybe I do:

You get just what you damned well expected all along from a bunch of blue-blooded mongrels!

— JIM HARMON

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

FORECAST

Deep in the affections of all true lovers of science fiction is a lady author named Evelyn E. Smith, astonishingly and rewardingly intelligent, witty, inventive and resourceful, yet, pretty as Rima of *Green Mansions*, she is every bit as elusive as that most exasperating of fictional creations.

In other words, strapping her to the typewriter is a real job, but one from which we have not flinched between each and every one of her stories.

This announcement, then, is to call attention to our unexpectedly great success in extracting an entire novella from her — no little bitty item but a real story, cleverly plotted, touchingly characterized, gracefully and tellingly told, with a logic that should confound those who believe women and logic are incompatible — a silly dogma we don't hold to, but especially in Evelyn E. Smith's case.

Called SENTRY OF THE SKY, her novella concerns Sub-Archivist Clarey, who is convinced that there must be a way to get up in the world, and indeed there is — but who'd ever think this was it?

End of announcement, except that everything else in the issue will be a bonus, an Evelyn E. Smith story being worth the price of admission. Oh, and we're at her for more, and will continue until she brings one forth, at which point we will repeat the process. Ad, if necessary, infinitum.

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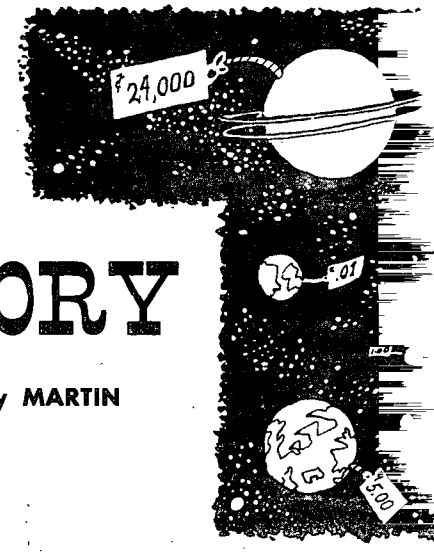
Channing wanted a planet. Had they sold him a pup?

BAD MEMORY

BY PATRICK FAHY illustrated by MARTIN



EX-VECTOR Commander Jim Channing strode purposefully to the reception desk of Planet Enterprises, Inc.

"I want," he told the well-built blonde who was making an interested survey of his lean features, "to buy a planet."

"Yes, sir." Her interest evaporated. She took a card from a filing cabinet and handed it to him. "If you will just fill this out."

It was a simple questionnaire — type, location, size — and Channing's stylo moved rapidly over it. He hesitated only at the last, stark question, "How much are you prepared to pay?" Then he wrote neatly in the space provided "One hundred thousand credits." That was exactly the amount of his signing-off bonus. It also represented his total finances. The unimaginative minds that calculated the pay of a red-blooded space officer didn't take into account all the attractive ways of spending it that a rumbustious pioneer Vector provided.

He gave the blonde the card and she wrote a name on it. The smile she gave him was altogether impersonal. She liked the look of the big, gangling fellow with "Space" written all over his bronzed face and crinkled blue eyes, but . . .

She said, "Will you come this way, please?"

The name on the desk identi-

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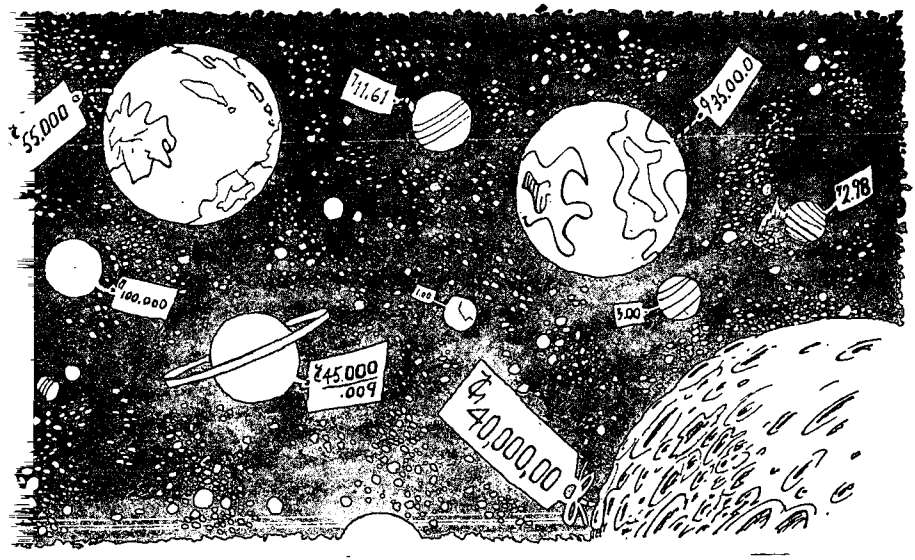

fied him as "Mr. Folan" and he was a tall, affable man.

"I think we can suit you, Commander — er — Mr. Channing," he said, "though what we have in mind mightn't be quite as large as you wish. Earth-type planets come rather high, you know. Now if you were to choose a Sirius- or a Vega-type — "

"Thank you, no," Jim said firmly. He had heard too much about the hazards of alien-type planets.

"In that case," Mr. Folan said busily, "let's see what we have available."

A MONTH later the doors of the automatic shuttle slid across and admitted Jim Channing to the third planet of Phylox Beta. It also disgorged one spaceboat, a clutter of machinery, a thousand tons of strawberry plants and a fully equipped house. While he was still taking in the first glimpse of his future home, the massive doors slammed shut and the giant ship took off smoothly and silently. A moment later it winked into sub-space. He was in business.

The planet possessed only one sizable island — it could hardly be dignified by the name of continent.

The rest was covered by a vast ocean. Still, as Folan had explained, he couldn't really expect anything more — not in the

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line of an Earth-type, anyway — for the money.

He spent a week figuring out the remote controls that operated the planting machinery. Once it clanked into operation, it worked entirely on its own. He had only to push a few buttons to send it lumbering in new directions and the big island steadily took on a resemblance to a huge strawberry patch while Channing fished and lounged in the sun.

When the galactic trade agent came, the strawberries were waiting for him, neatly piled into a mountain of gleaming cans. He was a friendly, talkative little man, glad to exercise his tongue again after the lonely months in space.

"What are you growing here?" he asked Channing.

"Strawberries."

The friendly smile disappeared. "Every planet in the Galaxy seems to be growing strawberries this year. I can't even give them away."

"But I thought the Ursa Major colonies — "

The little man shook his head. "So does everyone else. There's a million tons of strawberries the colonies can't use headed there already. Now if it was upklin seeds — "

"Upklin seeds?"

The agent looked at him in surprise. "You mean you haven't heard about upklin seeds?"

"No. Not a thing."

"Well, of course, you are a newcomer. It's this new race that's been discovered somewhere in The Sack. They are as rich as all get-out and they have a passion for upklin seeds. Trouble is they can't grow them on local planets and they are offering fancy prices to anybody that can supply them. I paid a thousand credits a bushel for them to your next-door neighbor on the fourth planet last week. Got a hundred bushels."

Channing did a bit of mental arithmetic. A hundred thousand credits for one crop. Whew!

"Could I grow them here?"

The agent shook his head. "You need plenty of soft marsh and a Jupiter-type atmosphere."

Then he had a sudden idea and he spoke long and seriously to Channing, explaining quite a few things that were new to him. Channing was still considering them, staring thoughtfully at the ground, after the little man left.

NEXT DAY Channing took off for the nearest sub-space center and a few hours later he was in Mr. Folan's office at Planet Enterprises, gingerly balancing his cap on his knee. Mr. Folan's sleek head nodded as Channing made his points and

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when he was finished the executive pressed a buzzer and called for the file.

"You realize, Mr. Channing," he said conversationally, as he turned over the pages, "that what you are asking will be a most expensive undertaking."

"I know that," Channing said eagerly, "but upklin seeds are such a sure-fire proposition that I thought Planet Enterprises might be willing to do the job on a percentage basis."

Mr. Folan wrote some figures on the margin of the folder and considered deeply. "Yes," he said at last, "I think it would work out on a seventy-thirty split."

"Seventy-thirty?"

Mr. Folan inclined his head graciously. "Seventy per cent for Planet Enterprises and thirty for yourself."

Channing said slowly "That's a bit steep."

In a few brisk words, Mr. Folan showed just why he was an executive of Planet Enterprises, Inc. He gave Channing the figures for transforming the planet's characteristics to those of Jupiter; he told him what acreage of upklin seeds he could grow and the exact profit to be expected. Channing's share should be about one hundred and fifty thousand credits per crop.

Fighting a rearguard battle, Channing said, "Your three hundred and fifty thousand won't look so bad on the balance sheet, either."

Folan reeled off his figures again with practiced glibness. Channing had the sudden suspicion that his proposition wasn't entirely unexpected. But the figures sounded reasonable and he had to admit that Planet Enterprises was risking a great deal of money.

"Then there is the not inconsiderable cost of your own metamorphosis, Mr. Channing," Folan added.

"Huh?" said Channing.

There followed the most excruciating half-hour of Channing's life. Proposition followed explanation, counter-explanation followed counter-proposition. At the end of that time he emerged from the office with a stricken look and a small white card. The blonde receptionist read the look correctly and definitely and finally crossed him off her list.

FOR A JUBE, Ckm Dyk wasn't at all bad-looking. His four legs growing directly from the bottom of the muscular, hairy trunk were strong and sturdy — always a mark of handsomeness in a male, for the legs had to take most of the strain of a gravitational pull several times that of Earth. He had three flexible ten-

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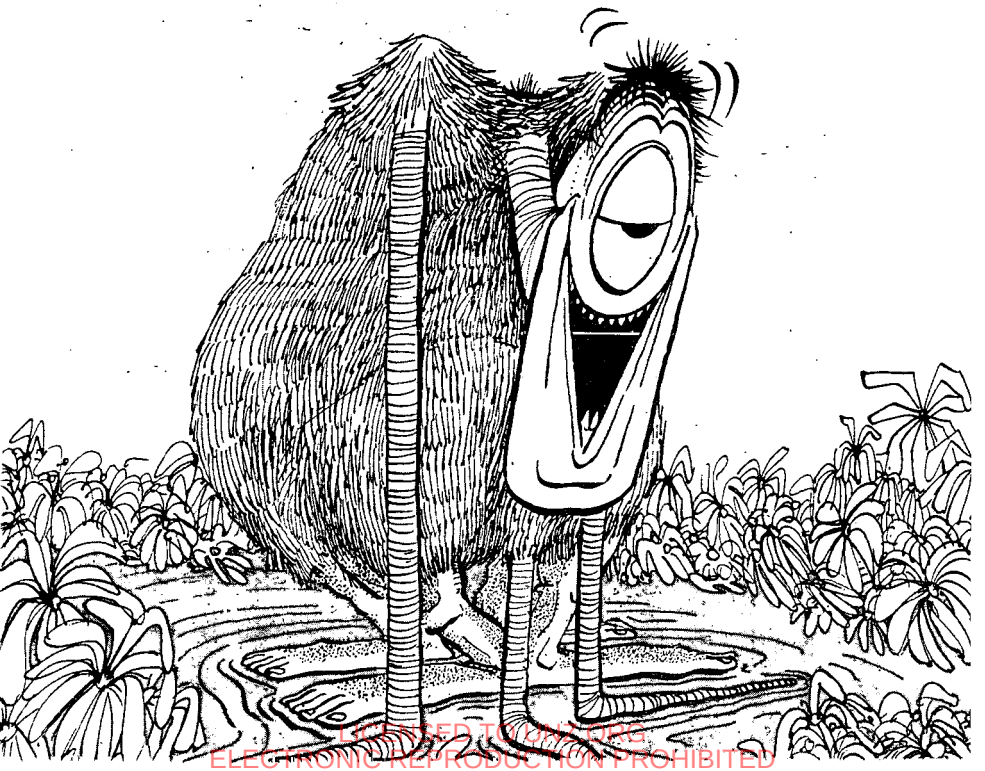
tacles, a thin melon slice for a mouth, but nothing resembling a nose. He didn't need one, since he breathed through a set of gills at the sides of his head.

He remembered vaguely that he had once been Jim Channing, an Earthman, but the memory had nearly faded. He had been warned of that, that he would soon forget he had ever been anything except what he was now, but he had already forgotten the warning.

Phylox Beta III had changed, too, and in as great a degree. The wide ocean had become a turgid, soupy mush, covered by the trailing growths of the upklin flowers. The blue skies had turned an angry red and the sharp wind that rustled the hair on his squat body was almost pure methane.

He waddled down to the low disk-shaped skimmer and started the jets. As it pushed its way through the clinging masses of the upklin flowers, he surveyed his crop happily. This was his



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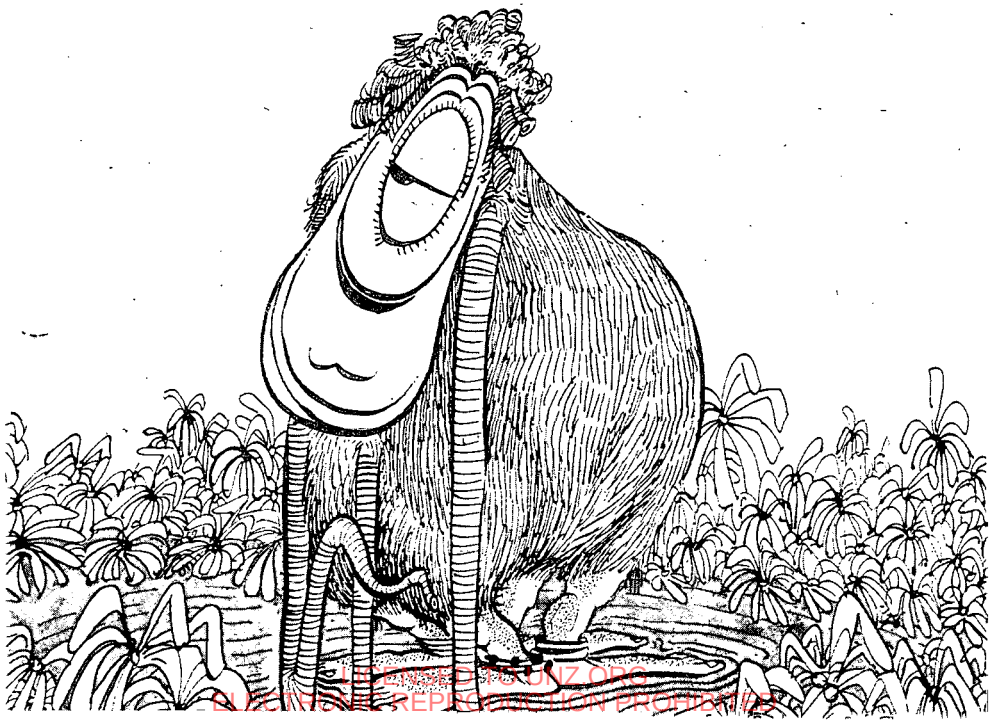
second crop and it promised to be even better than the first. He was going to be a very wealthy buk, he told himself. He could buy . . . His mind floundered. He didn't know what Jubes longed for, what they sought wealth for. He was certain at the same time that there was a flaw in his contentment, that something was missing

What he was missing dropped from the sky a few days later. It came in a spaceboat and was his neighbor from Phylox Beta IV. Her body hair was a rich golden brown and she wore pretty bracelets, studded with basim stones, on each of her four legs. Ckm Dyk's single eye, with its perpendicular outer eyelids and horizontal nictitating inner membranes to filter out the infra-red rays, shone with an emotion that was more than pleasure.

Her thoughts flooded his mind. There was a warm recognition of his admiration and a delicious suggestion that it wasn't unacceptable.



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"The agent told me you were upklin farming. I came to see if I could be of any help," she told him.

The sentences rang like golden bells within his burgeoning consciousness. He tried to shape his answering thought coherently, but his lack of telepathic experience betrayed him. She flinched momentarily beneath the raw, undirected stream of passionate love that overwhelmed her mind.

Then an answering wave of shy, tender awareness and acquiescence laved his senses. Without the clumsy barrier of speech between them, they had scaled in a few pulsating moments the shining heights of love and devotion that human passion sometimes cannot find in a lifetime of searching.

Ckm Dyk had never been so happy. They decided to farm the two planets together so they could be with each other always. There was sound economic sense in this; with both of them helping, the output of each planet would be nearly doubled. It meant a huge increase in administrative and paper work for Ckm Dyk, but he didn't mind that. Often, as he pored over account books and production figures, a tremulous, shy devotion would envelop him in a gauzy mental cloud and he would lay down his stylo and answer Aln Muh with all the great love that surged within him.

As the months passed, his happiness increased. The perfect attunement of their minds excluded all the scalding jealousies and the offended silences of misunderstanding that can mar the most loving human relationships. They did not need to see each other; the physical presence of the beloved was unimportant; they loved more with their minds than with their bodies.

It seemed improbable that such a glorious idyl should ever be disturbed. Then, one morning, a shuttle-spacer came silently out of the red sky and landed beside the house. Ckm Dyk waddled toward it, impelled by a carefully built-in series of reflexes which he had completely forgotten about and entered its gaping maw. He never once looked at Aln Muh and the passionate entreaties that echoed through his mind only roused in him a dull irritation.

JIM CHANNING again found himself in Mr. Folan's office. The figures the tall, sleek-haired man was reading out to him made tuneful music. Even when Planet Enterprises' massive deduction was made, his share was comfortingly more than a million.

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"Not bad payment, Mr. Channing, for five years of life! In any case, it's all over now — just a bad memory."

The executive smiled at him from his comfortable, familiar chair, aware of the torrents of confused thoughts hidden behind the gray eyes.

When he had come out of the stupor that succeeded the almost disintegrating effects of his re-metamorphosis, Jim Channing remembered clearly the terms of the bargain he had made. He was to become a Jube, a living nightmare, living in a nightmare world, for five years. At the end of that time, Planet Enterprises promised him, he would be given back his humanity and he would have earned enough money to keep him in luxury for the rest of his life.

They had kept their promise — to the letter. He felt it ungrateful of him that his paramount emotion was fury. He had been happy; no human attachment could ever make him as happy again. He longed for the glorious love and trust he had shared during that tremendous five years. Perhaps he had been a repulsive monster from whom any woman would run screaming. But he didn't want a woman. He wanted Aln Muh.

He said, picking his words with the greatest care, "Would a further metamorphosis be possible?"

FOLAN'S jaw dropped. It was a question he'd never expected to hear from any of the men who had taken the terrible choice for the glittering reward he held out to them. Most of them had picked up their vouchers and asked the way to the nearest tavern; many of the alien races did not find alcohol compatible with their metabolisms. A few had inquired tentatively about his current receptionist. Planet Enterprises had a big turnover in pretty receptionists, but they didn't lose them to men who had been unhuman horrors for five years. One big red-haired character had wanted to start a private war against the Sirians, whose brother he had been until two days previously. But none of them had wanted to go back.

He said, "It's possible, Mr. Channing. But I must tell you that a second metamorphosis is very expensive — and it's permanent."

"You mean if I become a Jube again, I must stay one?"

The executive nodded.

Channing gestured toward the payment voucher.

"You said it was expensive. Is there enough there to cover it?"

Folan looked curiously at him. "Yes, more than enough."

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He waited to hear what the big man would say next.

Channing licked dry lips. A terrible doubt assailed him. Maybe Aln Muh had been metamorphosed too. Maybe she had returned to her former self — whatever that may have been —while he sat here.

He looked down at the big, freckled hands resting on his knees. They were trembling and his palms felt moist. Without looking up, he asked, "Is the period of metamorphosis always for a term of five years?"

"Invariably. No other term is possible in the present state of our knowledge of the technique — except permanency."

A great sigh escaped Channing. That was all right, then. Aln Muh was genuinely a Jube. The agent had told him about her — mentioned her by name, he remembered now — had said that she was upklin farming on the neighboring planet. If she had been metamorphosed, she would have been taken from him more than a year ago.

He tossed his cap on the table decisively and stood up.

"All right. I'll take the permanent treatment."

CKM DYK sucked the methane through his gills with satisfaction. It was good to be home again. He had forgotten already that he had ever been Jim Channing, that he would never be human again.

He did not know that less than five minutes after the shuttleship had borne him off to Galactic Enterprises, Aln Muh had sent her spaceboat hurtling toward the fiery orb of Phylox Beta, mad with the grief of having lost him. It would not have concerned him much if he had known.

Jubes make tender and devoted lovers, but they are notorious for their exceedingly bad memories.

— PATRICK FAHY

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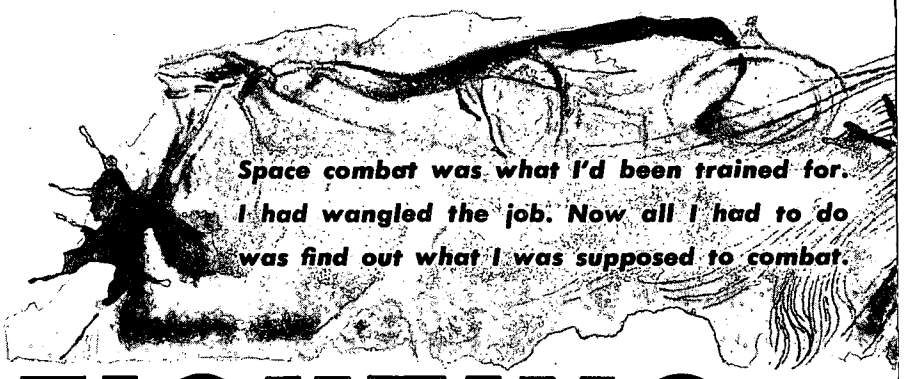
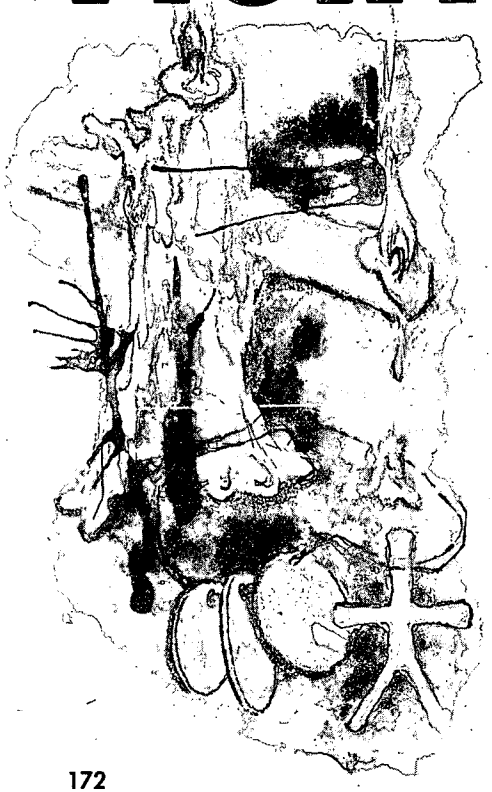


Space combat was what I'd been trained for. I had wangled the job. Now all I had to do was find out what I was supposed to combat.

FIGHTING



"GLAD TO have you aboard, Dykes." The Officer of the Day impaled my orders on his "process" spike and gave me the once-over.

The nameplate on his desk read "Lieutenant Stephen Barlow, ICC" — Interstellar Combat Corps. His face was thin and his eyes jumpy, as though habitually searching for cover. He must have been young, being only a lieutenant, but his hair was almost all gray.

He thumbed through the facsimilograph of my service records. "I see you've had duty in this sector before."

"On Wellborne, the next system rimward," I lied — to the

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By DANIEL F. GALOUYE Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

SPIRIT

same extent that my records did.

"Which is also in the Wispie penetration area . . ." He left it hanging.

"That's right." It was all I could think of to say. And that was enough for a man who wouldn't recognize a Wispie if he met one face to face.

Let me fill you in on the details: How'd you like to go through training, get your bars as a combat lieutenant, then spend the next four years nursing a strategy calculator at Federation Nerve Center? Point two: If you had a bosom pal in Personnel Assignment, wouldn't you get him to fix your records and find you a spot where there was some fighting to be done?

I did and he did and so here I was checking in at the ICC Outpost on Darian Four.

Lieutenant Barlow closed the facsimilograph folder, rose, kicked the leg of his desk just for the hell of it, walked over to the window and stared out at the black, dripping sky.

"Dykes," he said, "you've just finished a tour of duty on Wellborne. Right?"

"Right."

"Fighting Wispies. Right?"

"Right."

FOR GOOD measure, he kicked a doorstop. "There are two hundred and sixty-three active fronts in this war. Right?"

I smiled. "If you don't count

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the Battle of the Bureaus."

His face remained sober, lit up anew every few seconds by another bolt of lightning. From what I had gathered, there were more storms going on at any given second in the Darian sky than on any other planet.

"And," he went on, "even right now you could be checking in for a slice of duty Solarside. Right?"

I nodded. But my attention had suddenly become riveted on an ashtray that seemed to have gotten a bad case of jitters. Under its own power, it was clattering around on top of the desk.

"Then why in hell would a man like you decide, *voluntarily*, on another tour in the *Wispie* sector?" he demanded.

By now the tray was jumping up and down, spilling ashes all over everything. But Barlow ignored it.

"I guess I just wasn't through fighting Wispies," I answered.

Which evidently wasn't the right thing to say, for he looked at me as though I had messed up my orbit.

Across the room, an orderly watched the tray slam up and hit the ceiling. Then he went over and placed a small, white object on the desk. It looked like a piece of bone carved in the shape of a cross with legs. The ashtray quieted down.

"On the other hand, maybe we ought to be thankful you're here." Barlow kicked out at the leg of a chair. "If you came through one hitch against the Wispies, you might be able to show us a thing or two about fighting 'em."

He snatched up my orders and strode for the door. "I'll have these rushed over to the Old Man. He's waiting to welcome you aboard."

The orderly watched Barlow leave, then shrugged. "Don't mind the lieutenant. He just volunteered for the PM Detail. Bet you had some damned good PMs on Wellborne."

"Pretty good." I had to keep up the deception. "Taut bunch — capable, efficient."

He grinned. "Real fighting spirit?"

"Best in the Corps."

He elbowed my ribs and roared, laughing. I had to smile too. If I didn't, he might suspect I had no idea what a PM Detail was.

But just then the windows started shattering — pane after pane, left to right, top to bottom — until there wasn't a square of glass left in the office.

The orderly choked down his laughter, swore, performed an odd ritual with gesturing hands and ducked down behind the desk.

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STRIKING out across the drill field, I headed for the Skipper's office. There was a brisk wind and I stepped up the power of my rain shield to keep from getting drenched.

The word "miserable" would hardly do justice to Darian Four's weather. Take right now: Despite a downpour, the wind was screeching past the buildings. And whenever it managed to die down, it only moderated to a doleful moaning. The incessant lightning was something fierce and the thunder jarred your teeth out of their sockets.

Abruptly I found myself remembering the swastika-shaped bone the orderly had tossed beside the cantankerous ash tray. Then I realized why my thoughts had returned to that object: The buildings themselves were laid out in the form of a swastika, with a gas flare burning at each angle and end of the figure.

I wanted to ask the next man I saw what was the meaning of the symbolism — if that's what it was. But if Wellborne, the place I had allegedly just come from, was also in the Wispie sector, then maybe I was supposed to *know* about these things.

Anyway, the next person I saw was apparently in no position to answer questions. A noncom, he was hightailing it across the field, not even aware that he'd forgotten to turn his shield on and was getting drenched.

With the next burst of lightning, I saw his face. And if I hadn't known ICC Corpsmen were supposed to be "stouthearted, intrepid" (or so the videoposters say), I would have sworn he was near panic. He finally lunged into one of the buildings and slammed the door behind him.

I shrugged uncertainly, wondering whether I had done the right thing finagling duty on Darian.

There was a tap on my shoulder and I turned. But nobody was there. While I stared in that direction, there was a prodding finger dug into my other arm. Still nobody.

Frowning, I pushed on across the field. About the only thing I was looking forward to now was checking in at BOQ after paying my respects to the Old Man. Bachelor Officers Quarters, its windows ablaze with warmth and cheer, was like a welcoming beacon among the other decrepit buildings. And I felt thankful that, no matter what, the ICC always gave its officers the best accommodations possible.

Lieutenant Barlow stepped out of the Skipper's quarters just as I mounted the steps. He glanced at me, shook his head pityingly and started back for the OD's

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shack. I noticed he had his fingers crossed on both hands and there was a circular mirror dangling from a ribbon around his neck.

I watched him make his way across the field — kicking a stone, taking four or five steps to catch up with it, kicking it again.

Odd habit that Barlow had. And I wondered what was behind it. But then I remembered the orderly had explained it already with, "Don't mind the lieutenant; he just volunteered for the PM Detail."

THE Old Man, Colonel "Warhead" Mason, studied me with eyes of sad steel that seemed to be hiding the memory of happier days. He was a compact, wiry little guy whose nickname was a perfect fit. One more thing: He was the only Corpsman I'd seen on Darian who didn't have gray hair. There was a reason, though: He had none at all.

Warhead indicated a chair. "Damned happy to have you with us, Dykes." He jerked his head around and stared at the wall behind him. At first, I thought he had seen a Wispie.

"Nice to be with you, sir." I sniffed. There was a peculiar smell, but I couldn't identify it.

"I don't know what the situation is on Wellborne," he continued, "but we're having a hell of a time handling things here."

He pressed a stud and the far wall blazed with the features of a contour map.

"In the mountains north of here," he went on, glancing nervously over his shoulder again, "the enemy is trying to establish a foothold."

An arrow of illumination speared across the map to indicate the spot. "We've thrown them back six times. But they're damned tough."

Still crinkling my nose at the sharp odor, I took inventory of the room: two swastika emblems hanging on opposite walls, a pail of red liquid beside the desk, three circles and a hexagon drawn on the floor with chalk, a pile of dry soil on the Old Man's blotter. Outside of that, the office was pretty normal, unless you include the fifty or sixty mirrors of assorted sizes and shapes that decorated the walls.

Warhead spied a movement in one of the mirrors and almost jumped out of his boots. He caught a grip on himself, however, when he realized it was only his own reflection.

I wanted to ask him what all the gimmicks were for. But it was just possible that conditions on Darian and Wellborne were identical, and if I let anybody see I was confused by what I was running into here, they might

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realize I had never been on Wellborne.

My best bet was to go on pretending familiarity with anything that happened and keeping my eyes open until I learned enough to get by on.

"AS I WAS saying," the Skipper resumed, "we're getting strong hyperterminal emanations up there. The Wispies should have all coordinates zeroed in for breakthrough by tomorrow. I'm going to send you out with Lieutenant Barlow, Captain Randell and a plug-up detail. I expect you to give them a lot of pointers on Wispie fighting."

The Old Man took another anxious look over his shoulder and I went back to aiming my nose here and there, sniffing, trying to pin down the pungent scent.

"Ever think of going PM?" he asked.

I hesitated. "What makes you ask?"

"After all, it's a logical step after a man's already had duty in the Wispie sector."

"I suppose it is."

"With your experience, you'd make a hell of a PM man."

"That's what I've been told."

"I'd sign up myself if I didn't have to hold things together around here."

I had an idea I was getting the soft sell. But several things happened in the next instant.

The lights flickered and dimmed, letting the erratic glow of flaring lightning flood in through the windows. There was a whistling moan in the far corner, as though a blast of wet wind had sneaked inside. And, somewhere near the groan, a dark shadow began swirling like a vortex.

Shouting, the Skipper lunged from his chair. "Frankson! Lassiter!"

He seized the end of a rope beside his desk and gave it a tug. The other end uncoiled from around the starter pully of an auxiliary generator and the engine *putt-putted* to life.

"Frankson! Lassiter!" he roared again. "Damned PM Detail! Never around when you need them!"

The generator's output built up and the lights brightened again. Power returned to the sound-negation system, deadening the roar of thunder outside. At the same time, the cloud that was hovering at the far end of the room began swallowing itself up in its own vortex. But not before a nearby chair did a shuddering dance across the floor, then hurled itself to destruction against the side of the desk.

Warhead stood there with

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perspiration on his forehead. He fished a little white sack from under his blouse and jiggled it at the end of its string. And now I was almost choking with the scent I couldn't identify before.

"Concentrated garlic extract," he explained. "We find it works better than anything else. What are you using?"

"I — that is — nothing at the moment."

He started. "Nothing! Nothing *at all?*"

"I mean — well, I just haven't had a chance to get squared away yet and —"

"You get down to Supply on the double and check out the full works! I won't have any man in my command unnecessarily exposed — no matter how brave he *thinks* he is!"

THE supply clerk was a cocky old bird. He was a four-striper, meaning only four re-enlistments, but the lines on his face looked like dozens of years of tough service.

I watched the mound of Federation Issue grow on the counter as he added to it, item by item: a carton of candles sprinkled with silver dust, three bags of garlic extract, a box of mud, a jar of dirty water with larvae flipping around in it, two swastika medallions, an assortment of mirrors, mounted and unmounted.

He produced a gunny sack and began shoving the stuff inside.

"While I'm here," I interrupted, "I'd like to check out a proton pistol, some anti-personnel grenades and a Mark XIV rifle." The idea was to beef up my modest arsenal of one beta-zip hand gun, which I had brought along from Solarside.

The noncom reared back. "Very funny, sir." He handed me the sack and turned.

"You *have* armament, don't you?"

He slapped a rapid-fire somnidart caster in my hand. This was more than I could tolerate. On one of the hottest fronts in a war that stretched a tenth of the way across the local galactic arm, he had give me something that only produced pleasant dreams for a couple of hours!

The noncom's rigid expression changed slightly. "I can see you're new here, Lieutenant. We got the heavy stuff, all right, but it's for those who's shipping out — or in case anybody decides to go PM."

Obviously, the PM bunch was the only ones who could count on adequate self-protection. I shouldered the gunny and paused in the doorway to adjust my environment-control belt:

Rain shield, full capacity; anti-lightning field, maximum negativity; capsular light projection range, fifteen feet (night

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had gotten a good grip on the base by now); noise dampener, plus eighty-decibel setting to keep the thunder from turning my ears into kettle drums.

Without exaggeration, I think it might be said that my environment regulators were fairly humming with activity as I plunged back outside.

I had covered only half the distance to the brilliantly glowing Bachelor Officers Quarters when the entire base was suddenly flooded with light. It came from two sources: Someone had turned up the gas flares, and an entire row of maintenance shacks was on fire.

I switched off my capsular light generator and watched base personnel running all over the place. Some were converging on a man who lay writhing near the center of the drill field.

"General Quarters! General Quarters!" the public address system blared. "Man all posts! Unassigned personnel take cover! Garlic and mirrors are the order of the day!"

I followed a major and a sergeant who were racing for the injured man. By the time I arrived there, the sergeant was kneeling beside him and a dozen other men were crowding around.

The sergeant swore. "Another casualty!"

"That makes the third one today," the major said angrily.

"There'll be more before this raid's over."

The victim lay on his back, lifeless eyes boring skyward, his face glistening with raindrops. And I found new resolve to bag myself a bunch of Wispies. Sneak attacks were being pulled off on one or two of the more remote, primitive fronts. But, for the most part, fighting was on an honest, out-in-the-open basis. I liked it that way — not like *this*.

"How'd it happen?" I asked.

The sergeant peeled back the collar and exposed red marks left by powerful fingers that had choked the life out of the victim. Two other noncoms hoisted the casualty on a stretcher and bore him off.

"Poor old Fowler," the sergeant mumbled. "I told him he should have gone PM."

"Guess he would have," the major said, "if he'd known he was going to get it like this."

I WAS left alone on the field, hail-sized drops testing the strength of my shield and thunder making the night seem like a stomping ground for invisible giants.

Darkness pressed in on me, until I remembered I had turned off my light projector. I flicked it on again. The wind moaned close to my ear but I ignored it

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— till I realized that, for a change, there was no wind blowing.

I moved off toward BOQ and something cold and sticky slapped me across the neck. When I turned, nothing was there. I went faster and ran into a tangle of dry cobwebs. *Dry* cobwebs — in this weather?

Lurching through the invisible barrier, I plunged on to BOQ and took the steps two at a time, hurling myself against the door. It opened easily and I was in a vast room that didn't at all resemble a conventional Bachelor Officers Quarters layout. Steel bars sliced the space into cubicles that were furnished with satin-canopied beds, contour chairs and piled carpets.

Each cell contained a tall, lean, fur-covered thing with a sad, naked face full of wrinkles. They were bipeds and had prehensile hands.

Soft music played and scores of entertainment screens sent their flickering light out in all directions. A Medical Corps captain went from cell to cell passing out fruit from a silver bowl.

He reached where I was standing and said, "You're the new man from Wellborne, aren't you?"

I only continued staring at the hairy things.

"Got to keep 'em satisfied, you know," he said, nodding toward his charges.

"Damned right," I said, wondering what they were.

The medical officer satisfied my curiosity. "I think it may be safely said that I keep the happiest compound of Wispies in this entire sector. How do these facilities compare with those on Wellborne?"

"Why — no comparison at all."

It was an ambiguous answer, but not to him. He took it with a proud grin.

The door opened and an elderly but rugged-looking civilian in a trenchcoat barged in and stood shaking the water off his sleeves. An arm band identified him as a member of the Press Corps.

"All right, Doc," he said, "I've got a portable translator. *Now* how's about me interviewing that latest batch of prisoners?"

"Not on your life," the captain answered. "They're in the best of spirit. I want them to stay that way."

The correspondent swore, looked at me for sympathy, then smiled. "You the guy from Wellborne?"

I recognized him. "You're Starhop Stanton."

"That's right, Dykes. Maybe I can squeeze some copy out of you. How's about it?"

I wasn't quite sure whether he

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rated a handshake or a stiff boot to his posterior. You see, he was partly responsible for my being on Darian.

His clustercasts usually rang with emotion, sure to raise the fighting spirit in any man. I can even remember the particular 'cast — his first from Darian — that had set me on fire. All about "a real man's front" where the "most courageous warriors in the noble history of mankind" face the "severest challenge imaginable."

Technically, it wasn't a good videocast. Too much interstellar interference and signal fading. But one bit came through clear enough to raise goosebumps and send me out waving the flag. It was something about "the Federation's bravest heroes" being "hunted relentlessly by the most treacherous foe we have ever known."

"I said I'd like to try to milk some copy out of you," he repeated. "The folks back home, you know, are eager to hear — "

"I'm going out on patrol tomorrow. Maybe right after I get back — "

"Fine! I'll corner you then."

OUTSIDE, someone grabbed my arm. "Thought I saw you duck in there. I'm Randell — Rusty Randell."

Projecting a blaze of capsular illumination, he was stockily built and had a pleasant face. The three small mirrors and two sacks of garlic extract that were strung around his neck almost hid his captain's bars.

"I'm going out with you and Barlow in the morning," he explained.

"You suppose we'll get us any Wispies?" I asked.

"They'll be there to get, all right. I was wondering — maybe you can tell me something about powdered snails."

We headed for a smaller, darkened building off to the left.

"Powdered what?"

"Snails — crushed, dried — instead of garlic. I hear you fellows did wonders with it over on Wellborne."

"Oh, not too bad." The "oh" signified disappointment, real disappointment. I had just been trying to decide whether to tell him I had never been on Wellborne. He looked friendly enough to take me under his wing until I got my feet on the ground.

But now he was saying, "Damn! Am I ever glad to draw an old veteran of Wispie warfare like you! Dykes, I feel safe now for the first time since I got here."

Supper in Officers' Mess was almost uneventful. Randell and I had the place to ourselves, practically, since I had been delayed checking in.

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Near the end of the meal, a bowl half full of soup floated off a tray as it was being carried back to the galley. The mess boy ducked, but not in time. He came up with the bowl inverted on his head and its contents dripping down his face.

Later, four chairs in a corner started a thumping dance that didn't end until one of the tables shot up to the ceiling and slammed down on top of them.

Randell took it all with an occasional wince or dodge, whenever appropriate, but offered no comment.

I was beginning to figure out some of the answers for myself. Suppose, for instance, the Wispies had some way of exerting force over a distance. Get what I mean? They could play hell with our morale.

Old Warhead Mason must have been really sold on this idea of teaming me with Randell and Barlow. When we finally reached BOQ, I found he had given the three of us bunks together in one corner of the (I started to say "room," but I'd better use the more appropriate word) building.

No individual rooms with all the latest gimmicks and conveniences. Instead, the barnlike quarters had stud-bare walls with black building paper showing between the two-by-fours and siding. The floor sagged and buckets placed here and there took care of the roof leaks.

Randell cuffed me on the shoulder and said, "I'll bet you didn't have anything like *this* on Wellborne, eh, Dykes?" The suggestion was that I ought to be thankful for the improvement. He was dead serious, too.

EIGHT or ten other officers were already asleep when Randell and I crawled into our sacks. Just then Barlow came in.

He kicked one of the pails and showered us with rain water. Then he propped his foot on my bunk and began unzipping his jacket. "So here's the guy who's going to show us how to fight Wispies."

"Ignore him, Dykes," Randell told me. "He's naturally cynical."

Barlow kicked out at the leg of my bed. "I hear he doesn't put much stock in garlic and mirrors. Tell us why, Dykes."

"I — "

Randell came to my rescue. "Simple, Barlow. Nothing to it. If we keep our eyes and ears open instead of our mouths, we might learn something."

Dropping his boots on the floor, the lieutenant kicked them into the corner. "Well, he'll have to show me."

"Barlow just signed up for the PM Detail," Randell offered, by

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way of explaining Barlow's ill temper.

This took Barlow's attention off me. "Just had my P-I session."

"How'd it go?" the captain asked.

"Checked in with a point two rating and came out with a PM quotient of eighty-three point six."

"Is that good?"

"Good? Watch." Barlow pinched his nose and the covers on his bed folded back all by themselves. The pillow rose, fluffed itself and floated down again.

"Of course," he added, "I won't be able to use more than a fraction of the potential until I get squared away in full PM status."

I always figured that if you pay attention and keep at it, you can dope out almost anything. A lot of this PM stuff, for instance, was starting to make sense.

When you're up against an enemy that can exert force over a distance, wouldn't you try to duplicate that talent among your own men?

If this PM deal gave you that sort of training, it sounded like pretty good duty. Maybe I'd even have a shot at it myself — after I brought down a few Wispies the orthodox way.

RANDELL dug an elbow into his pillow and made a prop for his chin. "You get rated on Wellborne, Dykes?"

I nodded. "Point three five."

"That's pretty damned good!"

Barlow crawled into bed and sounded off with a skeptical grunt. "What difference does it make? He'll never go PM."

"That's what you think," the captain shot back. "I got it straight from Warhead that Dykes *might* join the detail."

Evidently the Skipper had put words into my mouth.

"What about it, Dykes?" Barlow challenged. "My money says you'll never stick your neck out for *that* detail."

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "I just might at that."

"Real brave guy, huh?"

But Randell gave me a respectful glance. "Well, PM's not for me. I want to get home again when this is all over."

Abruptly a crackling sound came from the decibel dampener on the far wall. As smoke curled up out of the box, the sonic shield gave way and the tireless, roaring thunder crashed in on us.

One of the beds began bouncing around, hopping first on two legs, then on the other two. It spilled its startled occupant and slammed half through the wall, wedging itself among the studs and splintered weatherboards.

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Barlow lunged up and threw a switch. Somewhere outside a siren immediately began wailing into the storm.

Now BOQ was a bedlam, with everyone scurrying around trying to escape entanglement in the sheets and blankets that were flying through the air.

Confounded, I sat up and watched — until I realized my own bed was swaying ominously. I gripped the springs and held on as the floor shot away below. I did a poor job of dodging a rafter in the way of my head.

When I came to, things seemed to have quieted down somewhat. But the room was still a beehive. Two of the officers, each with a bowl of dirty water, were rushing around sprinkling the corners and walls. A third was embedding two crossed candles in their own melted wax on the table. Another lay on the floor rolling from side to side and groaning while a Medical Corpsman applied a splint to his leg.

In the center of the room, an officer and a group of enlisted men were swinging mirrors and using spray guns to fill the air with a fog that stank of garlic. A PM Detail, no doubt. I gathered that much because their efforts seemed to be directed toward a patch of greenish-white haze that lurked in the shadows

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up there among the rafters.

"You okay, Dykes?" Barlow bent over my caved-in bed and looked down at me.

I rubbed my head. "I doubt if my helmet will fit for a while."

The special detail officer turned toward Randell. "That's the best we can do for you tonight."

"Think we'll have any more trouble?"

"Not much chance of it. We've got the place pretty well roped off and stunk up."

They sprayed a bit longer, then left.

We all hit the sack, but I didn't do much sleeping. Instead, I spent the rest of the night assuring myself that the greenish-white shadow wasn't coming any closer.

EARLY the next morning we rode a negativized floater up through the storm, broke out of the basic overcast at fifteen thousand feet and headed for a towering slope whose peak was hidden in a still higher cloud layer. It was dry, though, and there was no snow or ice.

Randell steered the floater down to a barren slope, cluttered with boulders, crags and scrub growth and sliced by ravines and crevasses.

We landed next to a group of men gathered around a fieldpiece that looked formidable enough to hurl a planetbuster into orbit. I felt relieved. Here, finally, was evidence that we *did* go after Wispies with something more lethal than a somnidart caster.

Randell led one squad off the floater and Barlow took another. I followed, looking disdainfully down at my dart caster in its holster and feeling more satisfied with the bulge of the beta-zip hand gun under my jacket.

We reached the fieldpiece and everybody crowded around the captain.

"What's the situation?" Randell asked.

"We're getting peak readings from between those two boulders," a sergeant reported, pointing. "Breakthrough ought to come in ten or fifteen minutes."

Something tugged at my leg and I kicked out in reflex. But nothing was there. One of the enlisted men, too, was having a little trouble. He kept slapping his face as though trying to swat an invisible fly. A corporal finally handed him a mirror and he stood staring at his reflection and radiating relief.

"We have with us," Randell announced, "Lieutenant Kenneth Dykes, fresh from mixing it up with Wispies on Wellborne."

All eyes turned respectfully toward me.

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"A *real* hero," Barlow added scathingly out of the side of his mouth. His foot lashed idly out at a rock and it went clattering down the slope.

"Since we have a few minutes before deploying," Randell went on, "the lieutenant will give us a few pointers on taking care of Wispies."

I squinted at the big gun's control board and saw there were no conventional knobs and levers — only a few toggles and a score of calibrated dials. Evidently it wasn't a fieldpiece at all, but some kind of detecting instrument!

"Lieutenant Dykes," Randell prompted.

I started. "I — ah, that is — yes?"

"I said you were going to give us some pointers."

"Oh, sure. The first thing to remember is — no, wait — suppose you go ahead and take care of this breakthrough as usual. We'll have an evaluation session afterward and I'll tell you how we would have done it on Wellborne."

"Sounds like a good idea," Randell commented.

SOMETHING slimy stung me across the face and I staggered back, tripped and fell. I rolled down the slope, checked my momentum and tried to get up. But I was suddenly choking in a swirling cloud of moist dust that was going into orbit about my head.

Round and round it went, trailing a streamer of haze that fell against my neck, loop after loop. The coils tightened and I couldn't breathe. On one knee, I tore at my collar, coughing.

Then somebody was sprinkling dirty brown water in my face and several other medics were dangling garlic bags all around my head.

"What the hell, Dykes!" Randell said. "Aren't you using *anything*?"

"Of course not." Barlow folded his arms and glowered down at me. "He left his security gear in his locker. You did, didn't you, Dykes?"

I feigned a few unnecessary coughs to keep from having to answer.

"What would a fearless veteran of Wispie warfare need with security gear?" Barlow mocked.

Someone slipped a garlic bag around my neck. "You'd better use this, sir."

The indicator that looked like a fieldpiece started buzzing.

"Breakthrough!" snapped the sergeant.

"Into squads — form!" Randell ordered. "Dykes, you stick with Barlow and his men. I'll be

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floating around from squad to squad."

Barlow held up a clenched fist and his men formed around him. "We'll take up positions behind that outcropping over there. Come on, Dykes, let's go; we'll see what you can do."

I had to hand it to him — he had guts, all right. He moved off leisurely, kicked a rock, followed it, kicked it again and went after it once more. When we reached the outcropping, the rest of his squad had already taken cover. Somnidart guns drawn, they faced the clearing between the two boulders and stiffened.

A tiny point of violet light, suspended in the air, was rapidly expanding into a sphere. When it reached twenty feet in diameter, the first Wispie came through. His dark brown fur contrasting the sparkling color of the sphere, he carried a tubular weapon and dived for cover in a fissure.

I tensed, but Barlow laid a hand on my arm. "We always let a few of them through before we cut loose. Wait for the captain's signal."

For once I had forgotten all my other difficulties. I wasn't even concerned that the invisible something was back again, tugging at my boot this time. All that mattered was that at last I was in a man's war, ready to start bringing down my share of Wispies.

Eight more furry things poured out of the sphere and dashed for cover. Barlow drew his somnidart caster, apparently expecting Randell's signal, and centered one of the running figures in his sights.

I fumbled under my jacket, found the beta-zip gun and lunged out from behind the outcropping. I dropped to one knee and took aim.

"Hey, Dykes!" cried Barlow. "What the hell are you doing?"

He hit me with a shoulder block and we both went tumbling down the slope.

Between rolls, he grunted, "You trying — to *hurt* — one of those — things?"

THEN the ground was boiling and smoking as fierce lances of white light exploded all around us. We came to rest against another outcropping and I saw that the Wispies streaming out of the sphere were cutting loose with all the firepower they had.

Barlow pulled me behind a slanting slab while the air sang with both the gentle *woosh* of darts and the *crack* of enemy weapons. Wispies were falling all over the place. But so were some of our own men.

By this time I had my dart

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gun out too, since I'd lost my beta-zip somewhere on the slope. But I couldn't see if I was scoring any hits.

A few minutes later Randell came scurrying up to us. "What happened over here?"

"This *veteran,*" Barlow said, jerking a thumb in my direction, "tried to crack down on a Wispie with a beta-zip."

"The hell he did!" Randell's eyes bulged. "You out of your mind, Dykes?"

"I only tried — "

SOMEBODY blew a whistle across the way.

"We got 'em contained!" the captain exclaimed, scampering off. "Spread out and start mopping up."

"We're lucky this time," Barlow shot back. "Not a single casualty — so far."

He must have been blind. From where I stood I could count four men dead and three wounded. There were Wispies lying all over the battlefield. But, after the dart juice wore off, they'd be all right.

"Stay here and keep out of trouble." Barlow trotted away. "We'll pick you up later."

Then, in the next instant, I was fighting off a net of coarse, sticky cobwebs that I couldn't even see. A swirling cloud of shadows a few feet off to my left began growing darker and inching closer.

I clutched the garlic bag and jiggled it desperately in front of my face. But something had me by the leg and was dragging me off down the slope. I didn't even look to see what it was because I knew it wouldn't be there.

Shouting, I anchored myself to a rock and tried to kick my leg free. But my left foot was caught up in another invisible grip and I hung there, half suspended above the ground, with my legs spread wide and my arms outstretched to hold on to the rock. The swirling shadow bored closer, whistling and groaning all the time.

With a frenzied kick, I wrenched my legs loose and scurried back up the slope. When I cut around a boulder, however, I practically ran over three Wispies who were firing on an advancing squad of Corpsmen.

I bowled two of them over, knocking them loose from their weapons, as the third whirled and fired a blast just past my head. I scrambled to one side and my hand struck one of their guns. I came up with it and brought it around in a parrying thrust. But the thing went off and its shaft of white light bored a hole through the chest of the still-armed Wispie. With the tube spitting out a steady stream of

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fiery hell, I turned it on the other two furry things before they could reach me.

Then darts were singing through the air from all directions. One of them got me in the shoulder and I crumpled where I stood.

"Damn it!" I heard Barlow's voice, fading fast. "He got some Wispies after all!"

"Maybe they aren't dead yet," Randall said hopefully, just before I passed out. "Call the medics! Get an ambulance sled!"

FROM the edge of wakefulness, I was again aware of voices on either side of me.

"He's all right, sir," Lieutenant Barlow said crisply. "I had to put him out with a dart."

"I don't understand." I recognized Colonel Mason's voice. The Old Man added, "He should know more about combat techniques than any of us — he's fresh off Wellborne."

This time it was Captain Randell who spoke, in a grating whisper that was full of alarm. "He plugged three Wispies!"

"Dead?"

I flicked an eyelid open in time to see Randell and Barlow, on one side of my bed, nodding.

"Oh, no!" Old Warhead exploded. "That does it! Those are the casualties that'll break our back!"

"We lost seven men out of the plug-up detail," Randell said, "and brought back six wounded."

But Colonel Mason only held his head in his hands. *"Three* Wispie casualties! Of all the rotten luck! Call out the PM volunteers! Let's get things rolling before we're knocked on our butts!"

He glanced down and saw I was awake and sputtered. "Dykes! You're supposed to be an *experienced* man from Wellborne. What in hell ever possessed you?"

Either I had to carry out my bluff even more convincingly than before, or I had to confess that my orders had been rigged. But if I made a clean breast of everything, then I'd spend the rest of the war on a prison planet, and my friend in Personnel would be right there with me.

Barlow sneered. "Maybe he just got reckless. Or maybe he decided to go PM."

It was only a straw, but I grabbed it. "That's right, Skipper. The whole idea was to get on the PM Detail."

Warhead backed off, eyed me skeptically, then broke out in a smile. "Oh-*ho! Now* I see why you did it. Dykes, my hat's off to you." He turned to Randell. "How about that? The boy's got real fighting spirit, hasn't he?"

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The captain nodded in awe. "I've never seen anything like it."

"You realize of course, Dykes, that once you take the P-I treatment you can't back down," the Old Man reminded me soberly. "We couldn't afford the waste."

I answered with an indifferent shrug. "A soldier's duty transcends everything else, sir."

There was respect even in Barlow's stare. "Guess I had you figured wrong, Dykes. But, I don't know — " he shuddered " — killing *three* Wispies . . ."

He glanced down at a wad of paper on the floor, kicked it toward the door, overtook it, kicked it into the hall, caught up with it again, and booted it down the corridor.

Warhead gripped my arm. "If there's anything, *anything at all,* I can do for you, just let me know — in time, I mean."

He leaned out into the hall and shouted, "Orderly! Come take Lieutenant Dykes down to Psyche Intensification. He's going PM."

I WAS somewhat disappointed in the P-I Lab. A medical major said something about "strengthening hell" out of my psyche and making it as "razor-sharp, artificially, as any Wispie's is naturally." Then he stabbed me in the arm.

When I came to, there were no after-effects. In a casual tone, I asked: "Does this make me a full-fledged PM?"

The major slapped me on the back and guffawed. "Boy! What a joker! Does that make him a full-fledged PM! What nonchalance!"

When he finished laughing, he said, "See if you can pick me up."

I grabbed him around the waist.

"No, no." He started laughing again. "The *other* way."

This time I understood. I pinched the bridge of my nose and, through slotted eyelids, watched him shoot toward the ceiling as though caught up in a cyclone.

"Enough!" he cried.

And I let him down gently.

"Dykes," he said, "you've really got it! You're going to do a slam-bang job when all the distractions are cut off. The Skipper wants to see you on the field in front of his office. They're going to activate the new PM Detail right away. We've got some Wispie-Bs to take care of, you know."

For once it wasn't raining outside. Oh, the sky was as dismal as ever, with great rolling black clouds dogging one another from horizon to horizon, but the lightning and thunder seemed to have retreated momentarily, leaving

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a drill field with its puddles peacefully reflecting the light of the gas flares.

Colonel Mason had the base complement drawn up in block formation and standing at parade rest — commissioned officers on his right and noncoms and enlisted men on his left.

It appeared to be a solemn occasion, for the men were uncovered and had their heads bowed — all except a squad that stood by itself off to one side.

I started across the field to join them, but was overtaken by a slim figure in a trenchcoat. It was Starhop Stanton, the war correspondent.

"Just heard about your going PM," he said, falling in step. "Congratulations. You got a lot of guts."

I was beginning to feel better about volunteering for the special detail. It certainly seemed to carry prestige with it.

"I've got you to thank for my being over here in the first place," I explained. "If it hadn't been for your clustercast about the 'Federation's bravest heroes' being 'hunted relentlessly by the most treacherous foe,' I might not have risen to the challenge."

He paused in midstride, confused and frowning.

I went ahead, covering the remaining distance on the double, and drew up before the Old Man with a brisk salute.

He returned it and asked, "You ready, Dykes?"

"Yes, sir," I assured him. "We're going to activate the new PM Detail?"

"Right, son. We can't gamble away any more time."

He turned to face the men, almost stumbled over a rock, regained his balance and shouted, "Company, 'ten-shun!"

They snapped to and I wondered what I was supposed to do.

"PM volunteers, front and center!" Mason ordered.

Barlow and a sublieutenant came forward, together with three candidates from the enlisted men's ranks. They lined up abreast of me and drew erect.

"Men," Mason said, "it would be impossible for me to adequately express the appreciation of this base and the entire Federation for what you are about to do."

SOMEWHERE in the distance a drum began rolling softly. Starhop Stanton stood in the background, looking at me. His arms were folded and he was shaking his head slowly.

And I noticed the sublieutenant next to me was fidgeting and sweating.

"Actually," Colonel Mason went on, "we hadn't planned on

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activating this new PM Detail just yet. But there were those three Wispie casualties — "

He laughed and glanced at me — "which Lieutenant Dykes here arranged, I'm sure, as a personal challenge to himself — "

He became sober again — "and two more Wispies managed to commit suicide. So I don't have to spell out the absolute necessity."

The sublieutenant screamed, "I won't do it! I changed my mind!"

He broke and tried to run. But there were two guards waiting behind him. They grabbed his arms and held him.

Mason stared pityingly at the man. "Son, you can't change your mind. It's too late."

Starhop Stanton drew up behind me. "About that clustercast," he explained, "I didn't say our heroes were being *'hunted* relentlessly.' If you'd been on Wellborne, you'd have known that I said they were being *'haunted* relentlessly.' "

Before I could turn, the colonel signaled for silence. "We'd best get this over with in a hurry." He was still looking sympathetically at the sublieutenant. "Lieutenant Barlow, I believe you have the first honor."

The drum rolled more urgently and Barlow took five steps to the side and three forward. There were several sharp, metallic *clicks* — like gun bolts being drawn — and I jerked my head toward the squad that was off to itself. They were armed with Mark XIV rifles!

Just as I turned, confounded, back toward Barlow, the eight weapons went off and Barlow collapsed.

Colonel Mason produced a small ledger and an electroscriber from his pocket. He touched the electrode to his tongue so it would conduct a stronger charge, then inscribed a single check mark on the paper.

"Lieutenant Stephen Barlow, ICC," he announced, "officially and permanently transferred to the Post-Mortem Detail."

Then he gazed into the distance and saluted. "Good counterhaunting, Barlow."

And the rock Mason had stumbled over earlier hurled itself forward ten paces, came to rest, waited, hurled itself forward another ten paces and came to rest again.

— DANIEL F. GALOUYE

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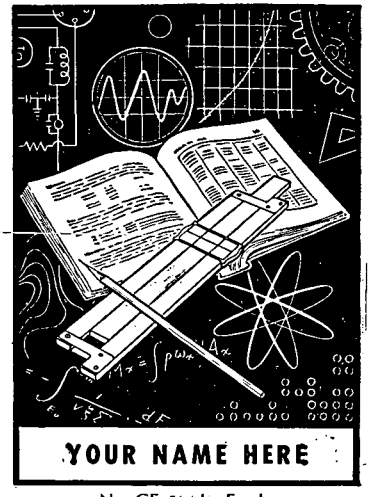

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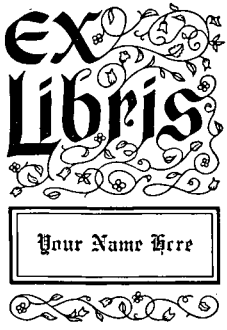

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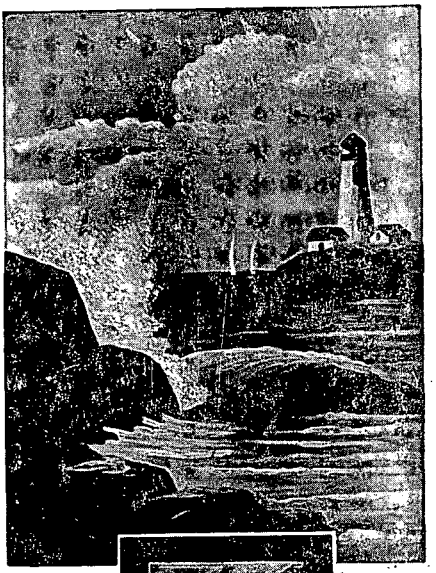

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